

# interzone

NOVEMBER 2001

NUMBER 173

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## 'QUEEN OF HEARTS' DOMINIC GREEN

*plus stories by*  
**CHRIS BECKETT**  
**GREGORY BENFORD**  
**THOMAS M. DISCH**  
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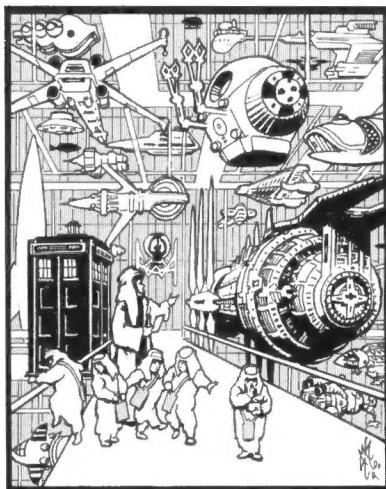
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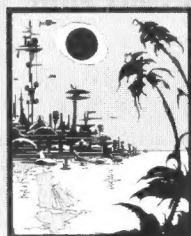
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**Interzone**  
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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

NOVEMBER 2001

Number 173

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## Worlds at War

Dear Editors:

I was curious to see what influence the events of 11th September would have on the contents of the October issue of *Interzone*. Clearly however, this was put to bed before you could modify the contents, unlike TV, for which frankly I am grateful.

So we get Nick Lowe's prescient review of the film *Cats and Dogs* ("Clearly between Them and Us there can be no peace...") but we also get Evelyn Lewes complaining about *Babylon 5* and "too much accent on war as the setting for its story-telling."

B5 was all about war and religion. The spinoff movies are overblown cash-ins. The writing suffers because one writer, J. Michael Straczynski, gave himself what was probably an overambitious task. But he did it because he had a story to tell, and in retrospect it seems to this viewer that it was an important one. As an example, see your correspondent Billy Stewart's description (*IZ* 172, p5) of G'Kar's selfless behaviour in the episode "A Day in the Strife." Will we see such behaviour at this time? I doubt it. But stories of redemption, of death and rebirth, keep hope alive.

**Steve Tollyfield**

[stephen.tollyfield@talk21.com](mailto:stephen.tollyfield@talk21.com)

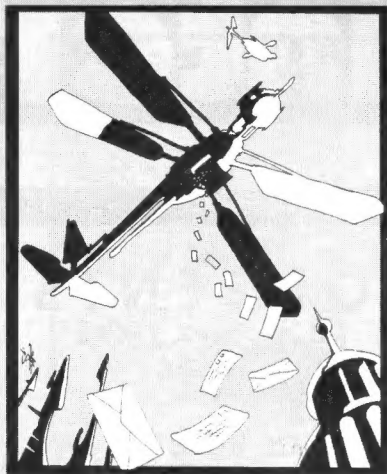
**Editor:** Yes, the contents of issue 172 were finalized before 11th September, as indeed were most of the contents of the present issue. But what can we say about those dreadful events in New York and Washington? (Well, we could claim one of our writers anticipated something like them more than six months ago – see Ian Watson's story "Hijack Holiday" in *Interzone* 166, April 2001.) The pace of events continually overtakes any comment one might make in a monthly magazine such as this. As I write these words, Afghanistan is being bombed – but I fervently hope that by the time my words see print that campaign will be over.

## Media Misery

Dear Editors:

Mulling over the Evelyn Lewes thread (*IZ* 171), Gary Westfahl's excellent article in *IZ* 170, and Tim Robins's over-inflated review of the shallow *Space* (*IZ* 171) I was struck by how utterly wrong *Interzone's* coverage of non-printed media is.

Nick Lowe's coverage of films is so comprehensive that films with minimal fantastic content, such as *The Kid*, are given critical breakdowns



## INTERACTION

way beyond their actual relevance to sf cinema. Yet the endless annual barrage of *Star Trek* episodes receives no mention. It's as if movies are ennobled merely by being given a theatrical release. Seemingly, the old prejudices towards television ("the tube," "the small screen," "the idiot box") persist at *Interzone*.

I wouldn't propose that *IZ* try to be comprehensive but, just like it does with printed media, an attempt should be made to judiciously cherry-pick. Just like Gary's "Novels That Science Fiction Readers Don't See" much of sf-related TV is derivative pap, but in amongst the 39 flavours of *Star Trek* do indeed lie little gems. Your mission, which up until now you have failed to accept, is to find them and give these select candidates your usual firm critical gaze.

**Allan Toombs**

Nottingham

[cytania@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:cytania@yahoo.co.uk)

## Babylon Bull

Dear Editors:

I have to back Evelyn Lewes on *Babylon 5*. My first reaction when I saw a couple of the early episodes was that it was completely absurd. Then I realized it was not only absurd but completely unwatchable. I also agree with her about *Buffy* – it's consistently clever and witty. However there is a drawback to watching it on BBC 2, wide format notwithstanding, as the programme schedulers on that channel seem to have a definite aversion to that series (ditto with *Seinfeld*). The only way a complete series could be shown on BBC 2 without the inevitable interruptions would be if the show was called *Buffy the Snooker Player*.

**John Brosnan**

Harrow, Middlesex

## Problems of TV and Film

Dear Editors:

I would like to explore a hypothesis with respect to the Evelyn Lewes-based discussion about what is good in TV science fiction, and the almost consistently (but delightful to read) negative film reviews by Nick Lowe. The hypothesis is that videographic (i.e., motion picture or television) representation is in itself inconsistent with the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure that comes from the reading of sf.

My point is derived from my understanding of Samuel R. Delany's analysis of sf reading and writing, which insists on the initial ambiguity of the text and the way it is gradually resolved as making up an essential part of the sf experience. Generally speaking, TV and film are inconsistent with science fiction because, with few exceptions, they are not able to create this experience.

At the most obvious level, when I read a story set in the future, unless it is specified, I leave in suspension any assumptions about a character's appearance. I have learned that we cannot assume even that the character has two eyes, two ears, hair, etc., let alone that his hair is coiffed and his body is built in the style most popular for middle-class white males. Movies and TV do not allow for any of this suspense or any surprises.

Let's take "Restoring the Balance, 2" by Tony Ballantyne (*IZ* 168). How could you "movie" that? OK, the burger bar would be easy. But what would Kaye look like? We don't know until later that she is somewhat degenerate, probably pale and dishevelled, perhaps even (dare I say it?) with a bad complexion and not particularly attractive, maybe even somewhat dumpy. What are the odds of starting a movie with a character who looked like that? And even if you did, wouldn't it give some of the story away?

Then, of course the line "...whilst her brother slept" in paragraph two. Movie? TV? forget it.

Now, some of the more imaginative critics talk about being able to see past all the film conventions such as characters no matter when in the future looking like 2001 studs and babes, and clothes only slightly modified 2001 fashions, etc. I can't do this. I can't suspend my disbelief, that this is just not the way it would be. When I read, I can make or suspend these visual decisions for myself.

Letters for publication should be e-mailed to [interzone@cix.co.uk](mailto:interzone@cix.co.uk) – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.



Is it just me, or do others feel the same way? And what about the critics, Nick Lowe, Gary Westfahl, Evelyn Lewes, how do they do it? Are they doing something I haven't learned to do, or are they attempting the impossible?

**Joe Parchelo**  
Ottawa, Canada  
jkparche@home.com

## Tigers in Them Thar Clouds

Dear Editors:  
Damn and blast the pattern-recognition engine that is the human brain! A pile of *Interzones* in my local bookshop caught my eye, and after much mental coin-flipping I picked the one that looked most interesting – *IZ* 171. No sooner had I got the thing home than I discovered that the issue featured three authors – Eric Brown, Leigh Kennedy and James Lovegrove – with stories in my only other copy of your magazine, no. 150. A record?

Ah well, at least the stories were good. To prevent similar embarrassments, and ignoring the screams of my student-sized wallet, I've put in a standing order.

**Edwin Kite**  
ed@starcity.freemove.co.uk

Dear Editors:  
I have just finished issue 171 and all I can say is WOW!

I enjoyed all of the stories, but for me James Lovegrove's "Junk Male" and Ruaridh Pringle's "Meeting the Relatives" were the standouts. In my opinion the short form is best served by humour and/or a sense of wonder and these two stories were classic examples. Thanks for publishing such great fiction.

**Dennis Lane**  
Pretoria, South Africa

## No Mystery About Kirkus

Dear Editors:  
Despite what Charles Rudkin claims (interview with Richard Calder, *IZ* 170), there is no conspiracy behind Kirkus Reviews. It is a newsletter for librarians that's meant to help them make up their minds about what books to buy. Its reviews are probably anonymous because a) they're not well paid (I wouldn't be surprised if they received more than US \$30 per review) and b) they're probably obscure freelancers, and it wouldn't really matter if their reviews were signed. If Kirkus is giving Richard Calder bad reviews, it's probably because his books have very strong sexual and violent content, and they

might want to warn librarians in case some patron complains.

**Martin Morse Wooster**  
Silver Spring, Maryland  
mmwooster@yahoo.com

## DNA and Faces

Dear Editors:  
In response to the letter by Marlies Vaz Nunes in issue 170:

Marlies found it "rather unlikely that one can read from someone's DNA what his/her face looks like." I have unfortunately not read the story in question ("The Suspect Genome" by Peter F. Hamilton) but although I agree it must seem pretty unlikely that isn't stopping geneticists working on the problem. If you go to the following website you'll find a research team who are involved in finding the genes for facial characteristics: [www.gene.ucl.ac.uk/face/](http://www.gene.ucl.ac.uk/face/). One of the potential outcomes, and certainly it's a hope, is that blood taken from a crime scene can allow the genes responsible for face shape to be analyzed, and a face of the perpetrator produced. Although the feasibility of this is some way off, it is a completely credible idea.

**Matthew W. Nash**  
m.nash@iop.kcl.ac.uk

## Adam Roberts Interview

Dear Editors:

In your interview (*IZ* 171), Adam Roberts mentions having heard of "a fantasy series set in a vertical world" but not knowing what it's called. Then he talks about a discussion with his editor, who wants to call his next novel *Stone*.

Could you let him know that he can probably win his argument by telling his editor that the first book of that other fantasy series is titled... *Stone*?

**Andrew Barton**  
Watford  
AndrewBarton@compuserve.com

## Points for Nick Lowe

Dear Editors:

I just had to take Nick Lowe to task for his comments on Angelina Jolie in the "Mutant Popcorn" column (*IZ* 171) – has he not seen *Girl, Interrupted*? I am not a slaving fanboy by any means, but to say "[Angelina Jolie is] wisely not given much proper acting to mess up" is unforgivable. Her performance, which incidentally won Best Supporting Actress Oscar, in *Girl, Interrupted*, was incredible. Her only other film I've seen was *The Bone Collector* and I recall she did very well with a so-so plot there. I'm not going to dispute that *Tomb Raider* was tripe (well, what else did anyone expect?!) but I don't think that has anything to do with Ms Jolie's acting abilities, or her "weirdly misshapen lips" for that matter.

Otherwise a spot-on column, especially re the excruciating pain of watching a great actor like Julianne Moore humiliate herself in *Evolution*. Oh the pain, William, the pain.

**Lee Tchami**  
Craigdon, Scotland

Dear Editors:

I have been an avid player of the *Final Fantasy* series of games for years now and have never played one in which you have to shoot up alien invaders as you roam around levels collecting spirits. I am disappointed that Nick Lowe (*IZ* 172) believes this is what the game is like, because the film and game series couldn't be further apart. I consider the *Final Fantasy* games to be an excellent form of fantasy entertainment in an industry which is growing; and I suggest that Nick Lowe (i) Writes columns in the future with at least some knowledge of the subject in question, and (ii) Buys a Playstation and a *Final Fantasy* game (he will not regret it).

**Alan Smith**  
alansmith12@hotmail.com

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# QUEEN OF HEARTS

*Dominic Green*

Cranfield was out in the open. He had to get behind locked doors. He could run faster than they could, but he was too pretty to be safe in public for long. He was a big strong man, they were weak and helpless, and they had the Law on their side.

He tried to walk in a crippled and hunchbacked manner, even tried to drool a little, imitating a helpless thing in the same manner, he supposed, as a wasp imitated a hoverfly. The weak and helpless things were out on the street, on the prowl. The police would not dare confront them; the police were, after all, strong, and therefore guilty. The police would come after him, however, if he dared to defend himself. There was honour in apprehending a big strong lad like him. There was no honour in harassing the weak.

*Maybe I'll get one of the perverted ones, the ones who've bought into the whole Big Bad Man thing so much that they get a thrill out of being manhandled.*

The landlord only accepted male tenants. Male tenants never made trouble. They were quiet, fearing lest their stereos be confiscated after they offended a little old lady two streets away. Their only drawback was that they deliberately cultivated offensive body odour, so as not to attract sexual partners. Cranfield himself had not bathed for over a week. Unfortunately, expectations were adapting to suit conditions, and the current fashion was for men whose armpits were unspoiled by soapy odours.

*You always think rape is a thing that happens to other men, he reflected. It only comes home to you when you hear that one of your best friends has raped someone on the way home, that it can happen to anyone. I wouldn't have thought Jerry would have anally penetrated a fly, but he raped five women before they could knife him,*

*shoot him and blind him with CS gas. He's in stir now, but he may as well be dead. We all know what they do to rapists in stir.*

*Of course, CS gas is illegal, but with the streets as dangerous as they are today, what judge would blame a girl for shooting a man dead on seeing his silhouette on the skyline and asking questions later? The Government's own statistics say the incidence of rape has increased one hundredfold since She Went to Sleep.*

He passed a row of billboards bearing the Face of Her. Not middle-aged and lined, as that face must now be, but young; beaky-nosed and big-footed, yet eternally beautiful; educationally subnormal and yet wise; adulterous and yet saintly; the rich bitch standing on a million women's backs and yet all women, no matter how ill-dressed and unfashionable. He could not feel contempt for Her, even now. He was sure that at least some of the stories around her sainthood must be true.

*She's getting old now, though. Dangerous people could try for power if She dies. No wonder the Regency Council's put armed guards round the Lake and won't let any press through. After all, it was the press that put Her under. Not that the press are complaining. Mystery is more newsworthy than drab reality. She's probably a beaky old lady by now. All Her muscles'll be atrophied from lack of exercise. Pictures of tiny patches of cellulite on Her legs used to make photographers a fortune. If that still holds true today, a man with a wide-angle lens could be a millionaire, I reckon.*

*Apparently Gaultier still makes Her hospital gowns.*

At the street corner, he heard a wolf whistle, and an invitation to go Greek from someone wearing a Rape My Hymen T-shirt. Someone dangerously small, but luckily



probably small enough to run away from.

*I used to laugh at women who had breast-reduction surgery. Now I see guys I grew up with having voluntary chemical castration to get hold of a certificate of zero sexual intent to wave around in court. It's the only way to be safe. Kids have to grow up fast now. When I was a kid, you could stay a kid till you were 45 at least. We had boys' toys, Ducatis, Doom, Duke Nukem, guns, drugs, and hard pornography. It must be terrible having to adjust to courts suddenly being able to give you genital electroshock therapy just for raping a schoolgirl once you hit 16.*

Luckily schoolboys were still only too willing to be mingefood until they hit that magic age when multiple sex offences could count against them. It drew the heat off older males, and made it safer to be out of doors. A knot of 13-year-old boys lounged around a Her Memorial Pizza Parlour smoking Virgin Cannabis Lites, surrounded by admiring molls in their teens, 20s, 30s and 40s, each moll pushing a baby carriage. Both kids and molls looked smaller than Cranfield and so, instead of running, he carefully detoured round them, staying under the street-lights where he was in no danger of dragging anyone viciously into the bushes.

"Penny for the kid, mister?" said one of the molls, who had a face that a knife or a bottle had travelled across years earlier – *many* years earlier. "You got to give me money, I got a little baby." She showed Cranfield her little baby. It was a very ugly little baby.

He smiled and pulled out a roll of fivers, making as if to throw it to her.

Her face twisted instantaneously. "You scared you gunna catch sammink? Fackin pass it to me."

"No," he said, putting on his best tragic face. "I'm scared *you're* going to contract something. I'm a haemophiliac and recently contracted Marburg Virus from bad blood. I wouldn't want to infect your baby." He indicated the two kids who had now spread out to either side of him. "Or your sons."

The moll exploded. One of those "sons" was, of course, the father of her baby. She might even know which one. Paedophilia was the only way to convince any male to breed any longer. "You callin me a fackin child molester? *You're* the fackin child molester." She held a finger out in triumph. "I seen ya."

Cranfield abandoned reasoned argument and ran.



The flats had an armoured front door, no windows on the outside, and transsexual guards, eunuchs to a sheikhless male harem. Out of breath and panting in the inner hallway, Cranfield heard the kids remonstrating with Nigella, tonight's duty concierge, through the speakers outside the front door.

"There's a paedophile in here. We heard from [www.bury.perverts.alive.com](http://www.bury.perverts.alive.com). It's a Bloody Outrage. We demand that you let us in to Deal With Him as Only We Know How."

"It is a medically proven fact that I do not have a violent bone in my body," came Nigella's voice in a menac-

ing high castrato. "However, I have been known to react badly when violently provoked. Move along now, flower and future of our country."

"We're gunna come along an fuckin sew yer knob back on an recastrate yer."

"As it's currently being exhibited behind armoured glass in Wim Van Kock's Large Penis Museum, Damrak, Amsterdam, I very much doubt it. Nigella out." The voice switched to the interior speakers. "You okay down there, Lesley?"

Cranfield nodded and waved a hand in thanks at the CCTV camera from his position panting at the foot of the stairs.

"Don't let the bastards run you down. And if you feel you need a shoulder to cry on, you know my room's right at the end of the corridor, Lesley. I'm just like a real woman, you know."

Cranfield buried his head between his forearms and wept silently there, where the tears didn't register on the monitor.



9:00 in the morning precisely.

Cranfield eased himself out of bed and commuted across the room to Go To Work. The terminal lit up with the faces of his pupils, 25 per cent present and, as this week's multiple-choice scores showed when he called them up, at least that much correct in most cases. Unfortunately, over half of the 108 members of the class who had completed the test persisted in the belief that Namibia was a moon of Jupiter. One hundred and fifty of the class were on Maternity Leave, 75 on Paternity, and 52 undergoing psychiatric counselling after Cranfield had given them consistently low marks over a long period.

His morning address to the class was interrupted by urgent incoming chat.

>Morning Lesley333! said the message. >This is Janine787! When can I have a date with you?

Still wary even after many months that this might be a police sting operation, Cranfield typed back:

>Sorry, I'm not that sort of girl.

The screen responded:

>You're no girl. All men call themselves Lesley these days.

The exchange continued:

>Some women are still called Lesley.

>Where are you today?

>In the north, I think, from the kids' spelling. Supply teaching. I'm replacing a teacher at the school I'm working at who was discovered to have sodomized his entire family at an early enough age for the experience to have been completely erased from their memories by trauma.

>How dreadful! How did they find out?

>A government random hypnotic-regression swoop caught him. They regressed all his children back to age two. The children had been abused so heavily that lights had to be shone in their eyes and food and water had to be denied to them for several days before they'd admit that their father had cruelly deprived them of their inno-



cence. Please-don't-publish-or-reproduce-this-in-any-way-as-it-may-be-titillating-to-the-depraved.

>Hey, you've got a Please-don't-publish-or-reproduce-this-in-any-way-as-it-may-be-titillating-to-the-depraved button on your Chat program.

>Yes. It randomly inserts strings that net police can grep to trace the circulation of, for example, court documents involving detailed descriptions of sexual misdemeanours, which as we all know perverts crave and swap and become disgustingly excited over. Some of the strings are less easy to insert casually, if you'll pardon the phrase – for example, “He thrust his engorged member between her bleeding buttocks.” That way the mentally sick and evil can be rapidly eliminated.

>Is it possible for someone to be both mentally sick \*and\* evil, Lesley?

Cranfield knew what she meant. He typed back:

>I'm not sure what you mean.

>I mean, surely if a person is sick, the fact that they are sick denies the fact that they are evil, as evil implies a conscious choice. Do you believe in evil, Lesley?

Cranfield cast an eye around the smashed outer glazing of his apartment, and the faintly painted-out lettering that spelt out FACKIN QUEER GAY SLAG PEEDOFFILE BASTAD backwards across it, and typed back:

>I think evil believes in me.

>What do you mean by that?

>Everyone seems to expect me to be evil. It seems almost as though I'm disappointing them by toeing the line.

>But you *must* be evil, Lesley. You're a man. It's in your genes to rape and kill. The Regents' latest research says so. I find it quite sexually exciting. What about that date?

Incensed, Cranfield typed back:

>If the Regents' latest research says all men are evil rapists, why don't women just wipe us all out and rely on sperm banks? Could it be that they need a beast in the bedroom every now and again?

>No, came the reply.

>They need someone to carry bricks up ladders. And until apes can be trained to do it, men will have to do. ;-)

Cranfield heard shouting from the window and twitched his net curtains. One of the Regents was in town. The army had come to town to protect the Regent from Sick and Depraved Elements. The MoD police had come to town to protect the army from the population. Cranfield himself was excited, as his flat overlooked the town's main thoroughfare. The kids would be off school, gawping at big green men with guns who were normally kept under lock and key on military bases out of raping range of towns and cities. The long-standing rule that no soldier convicted of a criminal offence could continue to be a soldier had made the army a society apart, hidden behind swathes of razorwire somewhere in the centre of Salisbury Plain, beset by placenta-gobbling Earth Mothers. The army itself had dwindled to a quarter of its previous size; the MoD police, meanwhile, were twice the size of the army itself.

The screen changed. Cranfield caught the movement from the corner of his eye.

>Did you put up the posters in the underpass like we

told you?

He turned back to the keyboard, incensed.

>I am not entirely happy about that, typed Cranfield hurriedly. There \*was\* a camera there, even though you said there wasn't. I had to smash it.

Despite himself, Cranfield could hardly hold his interest on the screen. It was not often that a public spectacle marched past his window in military formation. Walking on either side of the Rollswagen carrying the Regent, uncaring soldiers were being pelted with knickers filled with razorblades by screeching single parents. On either side of the soldiers, lines of MoD riot police were stopping the worst of the knickers with plexiglass shields. Inside her Rollswagen, the Regent rode completely free from harm, and indeed attention – after all, who would give a second glance to a woman who was simply a second-generation Her lookalike in a Government-issue Little Black Dress?

(Not that Little Black Dresses had ever gone, or could ever go, out of fashion. *She* had shown that. She had just been an Ordinary Woman, like Every Other Woman. That had been Her Strength.)

The screen flickered.

>We know. It was our camera. It was a very expensive camera. We had to see whether you'd do what we told you. And we had to see whether you had the good sense and guts to smash cameras.

>I am fed up with this, Cranfield typed back: >I've been putting up slightly risqué posters saying PULL OUT THE PLUG AND LET HER DI for over six weeks now. Do you really think that's going to change anything? Half of the kids out there can't even read your bloody posters.

He looked out the window again.

The car was flanked by Maenads, eyeballs inflated with PCP and prozac, rending their Barbours and tearing apart a dummy paparazzo that had been thrown to them by the crowd. Maenads had been the followers of Bacchus in ancient Greece and Rome – in modern Britain, the name had been hijacked for the worshippers of Diana.

New Army Recruitment posters travelling on a dray behind the Rollswagen met Cranfield's eye as he looked out from behind mirrored windows. On the posters, two huge, heavily-muscled figures, one caucasian, one negro, clasped arms together, covered in camouflage paint. The clasped arms, Cranfield was intrigued to note, had been totally depilated. The legend under the picture said COMRADES. Underneath the legend, Cranfield followed the blurb with his binoculars. *Two Soldiers Look Into One Another's Eyes With a Pure Love That Can Only Exist Between Two Men*, it began. The soldiers who had been ignoring the hail of knickers were now ignoring shouts of “FAGGOT!” and “SODDY SQUADDIE!” Meanwhile, the MoD Plods, hard-eyed women in short haircuts who didn't give the soldiers a second glance, were belting hell out of the female members of the crowd with expressions of sexual ecstasy.

Something moved inside the flat. Cranfield turned round in his seat to see that the display on his Chat screen had changed. The entire screen had blanked out,



and been replaced by a single phrase in 256-point:

ANY SECOND NOW.

He turned to look at the street. The Rollswagen exploded. Plexiglass riot shields flew across the thoroughfare like invisible frisbees; Cranfield saw one slice through a member of the public. Batons, helmets, knickers and whole soldiers were picked up and thrown against walls, doors, trees, and people until blood bled green all over the pavement. People bled green in the world outside. All other colours had been leached out by the tint put into the block's windows to stop laser pens being used to blind the occupants. At this distance, the blast only rattled Cranfield's catches.

He debated whether to rush downstairs and tend the wounded. He sat on his bed hugging himself. Across the room, the screen now said:

TOLD YOU SO.

He crawled over to the window, anxious lest he be seen by Security Cameras, and peered over the sill. Incredible as it might seem, the Regent was still alive, had dragged herself out of the shattered skeleton of the Rollswagen, blood pouring from under her V-necked cardigan, and was staggering across the thoroughfare. Although no doubt fatally injured, she was beautiful; although Cranfield knew that the beauty had probably been tummy-tucked and liposucked into her, he felt the same feeling of respect that he would when looking at the work of a great painter. Whoever her personal trainers and plastic surgeons had been, he envied them their skill.

Faces were rising from the wreckage either side of the road. Female faces, acneous, pitted, puffy, anorexic, scarred from continual Domestics, dressed in every unnatural fibre known to man. No decent plastic surgeon would ever have allowed them across the doors of her practice, even if they *could* easily have afforded her fees simply by giving up a few of life's little luxuries, like heroin. CS cans were rising from pockets. (Quite a few of the crowd, Cranfield was interested to note, sported fluffy Teletubby CS can holders.) Knives were rising from cleavages. Anti-rape machineguns were coming out of handbags.

Even in her dilapidated state, she tried to run. The end was messy. One woman, a young, quite beautiful woman holding a huge fluffy bunny with TICKLE MR SNUGGLES HERE on its tummy, kept the end going long after the blood had stopped pumping by stabbing repeatedly into the dead Regent with a butcher knife, yelling "MY FUCKING DIANA!"

After they had finished, they stood back from their handiwork dazed, as if not knowing what they had done, and then, hearing the first Tally-Ho of police sirens, began carefully buttoning away their murder weapons into handbags, bumbags and purses, and as blue lights began to dance on the horizon, melted away down many pedestrian underpasses where the blue lights could not go.

9:15 in the morning precisely.



12 noon precisely.

The woman was young, and quite beautiful. She was holding a huge fluffy bunny with TICKLE MR SNUGGLES HERE on its tummy. She was holding a bloodied handkerchief to her eyes, and dabbing tears away.

"She was like Her in person. She could have been a Second Her. She was so beautiful. Why did they have to kill her?"

"What happened?" coaxed the anchorwoman gently.

"Terrorists," she said. Then, she thought a little, and added, "and Paedophiles. They had masks on and I couldn't see their faces. They raped me a lot before the police got here." She hugged the bunny, which had by now seen fluffier days. "They said it was either do what they said or kill the baby, so of course I had to do what they said, because I couldn't let them do anything to my little." She hugged the bunny again. Matted blood and polyester came off on her ALL THIS AND BIG TITS TOO T-shirt.

"HOO HOO HOO, I LIKE THAT. PLEASE TICKLE ME AGAIN," said Mr Snuggles.

The anchorwoman turned away, her gorge bouncing up and down in her throat, and spoke to the camera. "The tragic death of Regent Liz Purbright at the hands of moral degenerates today. Luckily, police were able to prevent non-governmental news agencies from covering the disaster and cashing in on the grief of millions across the nation –"

Cranfield was amazed to see, behind the anchorwoman, a completely different Rollswagen being shot to pieces by balaclava-clad terrorist paedophiles on a flyover he recognized from Luton. Then the young, quite beautiful woman appeared in the background again. Someone had evidently failed to patch in the right transmission. The young mother took the bunny by its legs and whacked it round the camera. A pair of baby-blue plastic eyes loomed briefly in the lens, then bounced off, leaving a sticky oily residue. He distinctly heard someone hiss "Go to Her" in the background, and the backdrop behind the anchorwoman became the Face of Her.

"– and we now have Regent Eileen Walsh in the studio – Eileen, do you feel that the death of Liz, who was a model to us all, warrants a day of national mourning?"

The screen lit up: REGENT EILEEN WALSH: WAS LIZ'S CLOSEST FRIEND. Eileen Walsh was a middle-aged dyed blonde in a black V-neck, twinset and pearls.

"Almost certainly, Julie. When Liz, as did I, took on the job of acting as Regent to the two young Princes, she knew that there would be those who would react badly, even violently. But who better to steer the helm of monarchy than a mother, like that mother who even now is lying like a Sleeping Beauty Princess in readiness to wake and become our Queen of Hearts –"

Cranfield minimized the TV transmission, and was left staring at a Chat screen. The Chat screen said:

>Depressed yet?

Cranfield knew now that Janine 787, besides being a sociopath and saboteur, was also able to see not just Cranfield himself and the thoroughfare beneath his house, but also his television screen. This narrowed her

place of residence down to one of two blocks, one of which, Gerry Adams House, was an all-maler. The only remaining block, Our Lady Sleeping, was a Council block, inadvisable to enter.

He tried to peer at both blocks out of the corner of his eye.

>Sneaky Peeky! said the screen.

He turned back to the screen and typed into it furiously, adding an exclamation mark to indicate his ultimate rage:

>Very depressed that you feel you have to resort to killing people to get my attention!

>Reasoned argument doesn't work any more, said the screen; >because reasoned argument assumes that the entire population watches every Party Political Broadcast, rather than turning over to watch the soap opera on the other side. People don't form opinions. Even the Prime Minister looks at what the rest of the country professes to think before making a decision, and the rest of the country looks round to see what everyone else is thinking before it thinks. Somewhere in this country might be a person who actually thinks for him- or herself. By extreme acts of violence such as the death of Brave Regent Liz, we demonstrate to the Common Herd that an alternative point of view exists.

>Who's we? typed Cranfield.

>People who want to be free to abuse Mixed Infants in peace, replied the screen.

>Paedophiles??? typed Cranfield.

>Paedophile terrorist hamster-strangling anarcho-rapist homophobe spouse-battering cum-worshipping vampire scumbags, elaborated the screen proudly.

>Don't all those activities tend to fill up your day rather?

>Typical man. Can only commit one abomination at once. ;-)

Cranfield hesitated, looked the Council buildings squarely in the windows, and typed:

>Why are you telling me all this?

The screen flashed back a message in reverse-video 72-point.

>!!!YOU'RE OUR NEW RECRUIT!!!

>Ohhhhhh no, typed Cranfield. >Posters yes. Plastique no.

>Oh \*yes\*. We know you're one of us. You've been proving it for the last six weeks by scrawling on walls, tacking up posters and pissing subversive messages in the snow. From an early age you've wanted to do violence to the weak. You try to deny it, but those thoughts wouldn't be there if you weren't in some way different, sick, twisted, and evil. Do you deny you have thoughts of holding women down while you have sex with them?

"Well, I've thought of having sex with women, full stop," said Cranfield to himself dejectedly, without typing in anything.

>There you are, then. And if I were to show you pictures of any of your 13-year-old pupils naked, would you become erect? Answer!

Cranfield blinked. He typed back:

>\*Have\* you got any pictures like that?

The screen typed back:

>HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

>If you find that amusing, \*you\* are quite clearly the evil one, \*not\* me.

>It's clear we're the Forces of Evil. The Forces of Good would never deliberately stage the death of a Regent, right? We stand for an end to all that is right and proper. We believe that those who call themselves our current Heads of State are holding the post illegally. We believe that the Certification of Unfit Parenthood passed on the two Princes' former legal guardian in 1997 due to his being a proven adulterer was unlawful and engineered solely to propel the Princes' current guardians to the position of joint Regents. We believe that the extent of the control the Regents have exerted over the Church of England since their accession is, even if lawful, unacceptable, and that the Archbishop of Canterbury and his fellow Archbishops should never have simply bowed down and translated the Regents' demands into proclamations *ex cathedra*. We also believe that the oath of loyalty sworn by the army to the Monarch did not bind the army to obey the Monarch's Regents after the Monarch's death. If you would like a New Member of the Resistance Welcome Pack, one will be sent to you as soon as possible. Do you want a New Member of the Resistance Welcome Pack?

The prompt winked on the screen lasciviously.

*No sense in being hung for a lamb*, thought Cranfield.

>YES.

>DON'T SHOUT. FIREWALLS HAVE EARS.



Cranfield was out in the Safe Half Hour before dawn. No robberies, no muggings, no rapes and no murders took place in the Safe Half Hour. All of society's Weak and At Risk Individuals were at home in bed sleeping soundly with their pepper sprays and knives under their pillows.

*What about the Park?* he had said. Said, not typed.

>*There are cameras in the park*, had come the reply, and when he had typed back, *Surely not*, he had been told that he had almost certainly been filmed as he pissed against trees a number of times in the last two years. The cameras were mounted in the places judged to be most frequented by rapists, which was to say, dark, secluded areas off the prescribed footpaths. This meant that most of the cameras caught covert urinators as well. The very thought chilled his bones. Covert urination was tantamount to Unsolicited Masculine Genital Display, an offence almost as serious as Lewd Observation of a Naked Female.

>*Best to meet where most rapists rape these days*, the prompt had suggested. *On the main drag in broad daylight*.

By the Main Drag, Cranfield had presumed his Cell Leader meant Royal Wedding Boulevard, which ran between Fairytale Princess Street and Candle in the Wind Way. The Main Drag bordered the park. All of the park benches were occupied by Differently Housed Individuals. A massive luxury domicile had been provided for the Differently Housed at great government expense a



hundred metres further up the hill. Named the Her Memorial Home For Those Who Have None, it was painted a cheerful pink, with individual floral-pillowed suites, a callanetics suite and a crèche for tiny tots.

All of the park benches were occupied by Differently Housed Individuals. Cranfield sat painfully on a concrete bollard, watching the road, thumbing his New Member of the Resistance Welcome Pack. The front-cover picture of the Pack showed a man changing into a stag, being chased by Maenads changing into hounds. The Pack's title was in large, manually set print, and said, somewhat dubiously, *DIRECT ACTAION: The Official Magazine of the BRITISH COUNTER-HER RESISTANCE MOVEMENT*.

After a while, an MPV turned onto the main road from the dual carriageway and motored up to Cranfield. Unusually, a man was driving it. The MPV stopped next to Cranfield with an arthritic creak of brakes.

The window wound down electrically. A face with pink triangles tattooed on its cheeks looked out.

"Looking for a Gay Time?" it said in an impossibly high voice.

"Pardon?" said Cranfield, amazed.

The face looked this way and that. "You're supposed to say Yes, and get in. It's a medically proven fact that gay men cannot commit crimes of violence," it squeaked informatively. "You're my Bitch until we arrive at the target area," it confided.

Cranfield was having none of this. "Are you with the Resistance?" he said loudly.

The face's cheeks went white with shock around its triangles. It looked round to see whether any of the Differently Housed Individuals had heard. "Look, just get in the bloody van, will you." As Cranfield climbed in, two pink triangles encased in clear plastic were handed to him. "Stick these on both cheeks. They're only transfers. Before you ask, *mine* are only transfers too. I'm a Happily Married Man."

Cranfield looked in the back of the van nervously. "Your wife isn't anywhere near, is she?"

"I said I was *happily* married. I've been raping my wife repeatedly as fulfilment of my Conjugal Rights since I tied the knot. My wife has only just plucked up courage to go to the police about it. I'm what's known as a desperate fugitive." He shuddered and hastily stuffed a couple of packs of Pampers down the side of the driver's seat. "You wouldn't *believe* what I have to do to maintain my cover."

Cranfield's pink triangles had slid down over his cheeks, and the clear plastic had peeled off, but he could see no pinkness in the rearview mirror. "I think my face must be pinker than yours. My triangles aren't showing."

The Happily Married Man passed over his cigarette. "Cheer up. Take a drag on this. It'll give you cancer."

Cranfield took a cautious drag, and felt a wonderful warm stream of carcinogenic particles entering his bloodstream. He glanced in the rearview mirror again.

"Hey! I'm gay!"

"Temperature sensitive," squeaked the Happily Married Man proudly. "I've got another one on my bum that says REG'S BITCH. Smoking cools your blood and makes the transfer show, so when you want to be gay, you

smoke, and when you want to be straight, you don't. You want to be gay now. All the roadblocks between here and the motorway are heterosexual."

"Do the transfers come off?"

"They do if you use Laser Surgery," squeaked the Happily Married Man nastily. "So, if you don't want the love of your life to know you balance on the brown bludgeon, don't smoke. It's bad for you anyway. Anyway," he said, swinging the van round a mini-roundabout, "no brave revolutionaries can afford to have Loves of their Lives. I don't myself, any more. My wife... what she was doing to me was beginning to get *perverted*. Candlelit suppers. Doing It to Johnny Mathis and Julio Iglesias. Making me whisper in her ear in foreign languages. Making me wear," his nose wrinkled at the thought, "*chunky sweaters*. Anyway, she got more interested in my best friend than me, and the two of them blew the whistle on my raping activities and got on with their own."



The MPV was heading out of the suburbs now, having passed two barricades manned by Concerned Young Mothers, a major vigilante gang in this part of the city, scouring all oncoming traffic for prospective rapists, who they would first allow themselves to be raped by in order to confirm their suspicions, then turn over to the authorities. Seeing that Cranfield and his companion had pink triangles tattooed on their cheeks and were holding hands sweetly, they had let them pass with a few kicks to the fender and a pronouncement that it was "disgusting."

The driver suddenly wound the window down and threw the half-smoked cigarette recklessly out into the road. A tramp scuttled for it and fielded it.

"Got to warm the old blood up now," explained the driver. "Got to be hetero for a while."

"Glad to hear it," said Cranfield.

The Happily Married Man smiled. "We're taking on passengers. Everyone in our enlightened times knows gay men are incapable of violence. Indeed, some of Her greatest companions and lifetime soulmates were Not Entirely Straight, lord bless Her and keep Her and deliver Her to a fluffy afterlife very very soon. However, every concerned mother faces the dilemma that, Whilst Gay Men Are All Very Well and Good in the Privacy of Their Own Home, Is It Safe For My Child to Be Alone With Them? The answer, of course, is no. Which is why we, while our passengers are aboard, are going to have to act straight as arrows."

He slowed the van, put an arm round Cranfield and, the pink triangles fading on his cheeks, gave him a violently-resisted kiss for the CCTV cameras as the vehicle stopped next to a public library where a figure in slacks and a long brown coat was waiting – a figure that curved too much in too many important places to be anything but female.

Cranfield could remember a time when, as a very young boy, he had been close to a grown lady. She had smelled like soap and oranges. He had harboured thoughts of seeing her without clothes. He had grown up with girls who

had started out looking like boys, like him, until they had begun to fill out like plump-bottomed hourglasses filling with amber-skinned sand. He had wanted, even then, to do *things* to them, things of which he had been ashamed and which were true proof of the essential nature of the male beast. What the Public Information Films said was true. What Cranfield suddenly found himself realizing in horror was that he did not care how true it was. He *wanted* to be able to Do Things to women.

The fact that this woman appeared eminently do-able made him shrink into the seat in abject desolation. She was a metre-and-a-half sliver of pink curvaceous loveliness, sporting the tracksuit and high-speed running shoes every smart woman wore today if she wanted to be able to catch a man. Cranfield reflected in horror that he wouldn't mind too much if he were caught.

"Good morning," she said, and Cranfield suddenly felt real fear. The voice was unmistakably American. Did this mean that she was a libertarian revolutionary born in a free society radically different from Cranfield's own? It was, in fact, more likely that she was a sexual vengeance tourist. Britain was popular worldwide among battered women from less mature cultures who paid high air fares just to travel to a country where they could randomly point to a man, yell "RAAAAAPE!" and be surrounded by sympathetic and rather hunky police officers within minutes.

The Happily Married Man disengaged from Cranfield, moved out into the traffic, and, the triangles on his cheeks now gone completely, gave the woman a lingering, passionate kiss.

The woman disengaged and wiped her mouth. "Next time you do that I'm yelling cop, Dave, revolution or no revolution."

Dave sniggered. The van grumbled to a halt a second time. There was a child on the pavement. Cranfield felt a thrill of danger. At any moment, he might be seen eyeing the child's bottom with intent by a concerned parent and ushered off to be not-so-chemically castrated by neighbourhood vigilantes.

The child – Cranfield kicked himself internally, the *pre-teen adult* – was one of those who would be described as exhibiting "Dangerous Testosterone-Induced Behaviour Syndrome" on Cranfield's school register. Juvenile testosterone poisoning was taken very seriously by school authorities, since overdoses of male hormones could be statistically linked to violent crime. As, *indeed*, thought Cranfield, *can teacake consumption and restrictive underclothing if you not only massage your data, but beat it violently with a big stick*.

Cranfield took pleasure in the fact that the child would be fed progesterone until he grew breasts the day he was caught setting fire to his first dog. However, this didn't change the fact that he could set fire to as many dogs and middle-aged teachers as he liked until that day.

The child eyed the people-carrier nervously. "Mum-mybitch said the van was going to have other Fledgeling Adults in it."

The woman fastened her eyes on those of the child. "All other children on the trip have been retained by Child Security for a random paedophilia trawl interrogation."

She looked down meaningfully at her sleeve, which, Cranfield noticed to his horror, bore a yellow CSA armband, as if to say to the kid, *so just you watch it too, buster, or you too can be sat in a dark room without toilet breaks for the next 48 hours until you admit your daddy tied you to a table and used your back body as a tunnel for his trainset*.

He opened the side slide door. Sheepishly, the boy got in.

*Ohmygod ohmygod*, thought Cranfield. *One of them's alone in an enclosed space with me, the poor little poppet. Have those stupid bastards any idea what I might do to it? I mean, I'm a man. I might touch it or something. I might say something that might be construed as a sexual innuendo*.

*Mind you, I'm a teacher. I'm a domesticated male. It normally takes us domesticated males quite a while to bestially attack children we're locked up with. Old Queery Quirke from Geography, he got trapped in an elevator with two of his twelve-year-olds, and they had to bite off three of his fingers before he attacked them with vicious open-handed slaps. He looked quite happy in the postcard the Masculinity Correction Centre sent back*.

Absorbing the fact that it couldn't confront a CSA armband, the child turned its attention to Cranfield.

"I'm not showing you my arse, you old queer bastard."

Cranfield looked at his reflection in the mirror in alarm, but the pink triangles were no longer there.

"I'm sorry?"

"You said you wanted to look at my arse. Got any smokes?"

The woman smiled sweetly at the child and stroked his hair. "Little boys who don't want to be anally examined for traces of semen on a purely random basis will be very quiet indeed."

The boy became very quiet, chastened by the dread power of the CSA. Cranfield turned his face nervously away.



No one spoke for the remainder of the journey. At around Daventry, Happily Married Dave handed Cranfield a leaflet. The leaflet showed leafy country lanes, contented cows mooing in green fields, an idyllic island in the centre of a lake surrounded by wailing women tearing their hair out and attacking their own arms and chests with razorblades. The leaflet was entitled HAPPY DAYS OUT IN ALTHORP.

"That's Her Resting Place," whispered Cranfield. "The Oval Lake. That's Althorp House. The Regents' Palace. We'll never get past Security."

"Security," whispered Dave in a voice inaudible to the passenger, "are looking for Functional Males. It is well known that it is only the male mind that can conceive of acts of beastliness. How can a mind made for motherhood commit murder? We only have to look at the true tears of contrite joy wept by Rosemary West on her enlargement from male gaol. Of course, this does not apply to our army and police force, magnificent muscular



beefhunks that they are. I do so *love* a man in uniform, don't you?" He held a spray can up to Dave's face and squirted him full in the face. The squirt tasted like a kiss from a scarab beetle with halitosis.

"What was that?" squeaked Cranfield in a falsetto voice which, he was outraged to realize, was his own.

"Here, take these," muttered Dave, dishing out official-looking leaflets. "These are your Chemical Castration Certificates; you won't get past Security without them. Your violent and irrational impulses to kiss the girls and make them cry have been excised by modern medical science as of now. You are neither hetero nor homo, neither fish nor fowl. You are asexual." He tucked the spray can into Cranfield's top pocket and grinned. "You'll have to keep spraying yourself with it in the mouth every ten seconds or so, I'm afraid. It says 'ORAL-THRUSH-GON' on the outside of the cylinder. It's garlic and helium flavour. Sorry, but we didn't have enough time to do the Full Job on you."

"I'm relieved to hear it," squeaked Cranfield. "Otherwise I might have to talk like this all the time," he added in a deep basso profundo. He remembered the other man's impossibly high voice. "Have you had the Full Job done yourself?"

"No," said Happily Married Dave sadly. "I've always been able to pass for a castrato without loss of poking privileges. If I shave well, though," he confided evilly, "I can pass for 15-and-a-half and Flout the Law. Gaw! The bitches I've had in the back of this thing. I have to turn the alarm on, mind, to convince the rozzers I've stolen it. If they found out I had keys for it, I'd be down the cells quicker than a Jap's Eye weeping."

"What are they doing in the front?" said the little pitcher in the back, looking up from scrawling ALL TEECHERS R MUTHEFUKERS TRUE on the rear window with a glass-cutter, backwards so that all those sitting in the front could appreciate his *oeuvre* in the rearview mirror.

"Mr Cranfield is getting himself chemically castrated for the day, dear," said the CSA girl. "Otherwise he wouldn't be safe to help escort you round Althorp Palace, now would he? Rest assured we only have your best interests at heart."

The boy's eyes widened in awe. "Can you chemically castrate someone just for a day?"

The girl's eyes narrowed evilly. "Want to find out?"

The boy shut his mouth and legs together.



The policemen on the anti-man fence were all male, and all had shoulders broad as yoked oxen and very good hair. These were elite CSA men, equipped to military standards, empowered to prosecute even army generals and archbishops. Dwellers in exclusive compounds to which women and children had no access, they bought these privileges only by absolute loyalty to Her and Her Regents. Their normal route of recruitment was through the Her Youth, in which any of their youthful exuberances were forgiven as growing pains. They were the white knights of Britain's new Camelot.

One of the white knights poked a bulletproofed arm through the car window. "Oi. Dopey. Papers now, or I'll shove this shooter up ya butt end-first."

The compound on the other side of the electric wire, barbed wire, and razor wire looked more peaceful than any other place Cranfield had ever seen. Policing seemed to be applied here, and, contrary to the accepted party line that less policing was always more, appeared to be producing results. A small child carrying a toy gun would, he imagined, be shot dead before he could hit one of the sinister lilac guard towers with a rubber sucker.

There was a series of metallic squawks and complaints as various parts of the car were clumsily removed and replaced after being scoured for explosive devices. Cranfield and the Happily Married Man were made to stand by the car and spread their legs for inspection; however, following a distinct lack of wolf-whistles and a Mexican wave of downturned thumbs from the line of cars waiting at the gate, no roadside strip-search and internal examination was carried out. The lovable little urchin, meanwhile, was given a free edible I PASSED SECURITY INSPECTION AT ALTHORP badge, chucked under the chin, called a "little rascal" and permitted to call the search officer "shithead" back.

The vehicle trundled through the gates and into a massive car park tastefully fringed by railings with over-curving spikes. A number of hunger strikers chained to the razorwired railings stared at the car, mouths watering, as it passed. Possibly they were imagining its tyres were giant Liquorice Allsorts.

"They haven't touched food since She arrived here," said Happily Married Dave. "The Northampton Tourist Board charitably keeps them alive by regular saline feed. They are mortifying themselves that God may choose to lessen Her and our suffering by returning Her to us, Her people." He made the Sign of the Heart on his chest devotedly. "Here is where we get off." He pulled up the handbrake and opened the door to the passenger compartment. "Get out, little Leonardo. We've got a treat for you today. We're going to look on the face of Her."

"Don't want to look at Her," began Leonardo, and, after a stern look from the Incredibly Beautiful Woman, added, "may she ever be Princess of our Hearts."

Cranfield alighted. Happily Married Dave, who had also presented chemical castration papers to the guards, swung himself out of the cab and gallantly helped the CSA woman down onto the tarmac.

Everywhere, there were flowers, pastel cards, and giant fluffy animals of every phylum. A queue waited to gain admission through a narrow turnstile. Beyond the turnstile, there appeared to be more guards than guests.

*Makes sense, thought Cranfield. As long as She stays comatose, and as long as they can stop Harry and Wills from attaining puberty by drowning them in hormones, the Regents stay in power. If they're not careful, someone might slip through their wall of thorns and wake her up.*

*Her our Lady, what am I saying?*

Then he realized, in shock, the awful possibilities of their expedition's purpose.

"We're not going to *kill* her, are we?" he said, out loud.

The American girl looked at Happily Married Dave as if to say, *was this really the best our People's Army could come up with?*

She grabbed hold of Cranfield's lapel. "Say anything like that out loud again," her voice hissed in his ear, "and I'll cry rape so loud these bitches'll leave the queue and tear you to ribbons. They're bulimic to a sad depressed slag and they'll eat the flesh off your bones before suffering guilt pangs and running off to puke you back out down the nearest Sanilav." She pressed a plastic wrapper into Cranfield's hands, and said aloud: "Make sure Leonardo gets this at three o'clock. He needs a regular sugar intake, you know. He's borderline hypoglycaemic."

"Am not," said Leonardo. "I come right from the middle of England."

Cranfield looked down at the chocolate wrapper. It was a make he'd never seen before, but then, he always shopped in the Bachelors' Quarter. The words CATALYST: A PLAIN REACTION looped across it in bright silver lettering.

He grew more suspicious when Leonardo leaned over his shoulder and said: "Hey, I've never seen one of those before. Do only queers buy those?"

*He's a kid. Kids don't know their Hypoglycaemia from their Hyperborea, but they have an encyclopedic knowledge of anything they can stuff into their gobs to make them hyperactive.*

"Jeez," breathed the American woman, turning to look at the queue. "Tighter packed than a San Franciscan conga line. I hate to have to say this, but we really do have to go in there." She said goodbye to Happily Married Dave, who saluted roguishly and swaggered off in the direction of the House through a squadron of formation kickboxing aerobics tutors performing on the ornamental lawn.

"Link arms with me," she said. "Seeing that we're going to be a long time in this queue, we may as well get to know each other. I'm Janine."

Cranfield flushed suddenly, uncomfortably crimson. It was, after all, a hot day.



The CSA armband and a good number of threats and judiciously-applied chokeholds got them through the queue in under half an hour, and they joined the column of slowly moving fuchsia that wound its spiral way about the Oval Lake, around the Ka'aba of Her Sarcophagus. Eventually, the queue wound over a narrow bridge of wooden planks that crossed to the opposite shore. In there, She lay, maintained at a constant 22 degrees Celsius, dehumidified, fed by an octopus of dripfeeds. Her ailing organs were exchanged on a regular basis for voluntarily contributed replacements from patriotic tots whose mothers had signed away their children's lungs and livers for the greater glory of Her; the tiniest lines that formed in the corners of Her eyes, Cranfield was surprised to learn on reading a Visitor's Guide thrust into his hand by a bored guard, were immediately and lovingly removed by laser surgery. Once across the bridge,

Cranfield, Leonardo and Janine would be allowed to file into Her Sleeping Chamber in turn and each enjoy 15.5 seconds of quiet lone communion with their Queen of Hearts, separated from Her only by an inch-thick slab of laminated banking-counter glass, before the overhead klaxon sounded and the queue moved on. Across a hundred oscilloscopes in the small, quiet room, Her heart-beat, Her internal and external pulses, Her brainwaves, Her Rapid Eye Movements, Her biorhythms, and Her horoscope marched with unchanging regularity.

Was she not now the Queen of Hearts indeed, since the old queen had been murdered by the mob? It had been the discovery of the mysterious Third Car in an MI5 garage in Tooting that had sparked the anger of the good-hearted majority. Cranfield remembered the storming of Buckingham Palace. He had been 15 at the time, and had known everything about the parasitism of the masses by the inheritedly wealthy. He had sat round the VCR with Mum and Dad and their mates and cheered and banged his beer can on the table when the lone Grenadier Guardsman at the gate had gone down under a centipede of boots. Mum and Dad had been all for the Revolution of Hearts and the installation of the Spencer Dynasty, but it had all happened very late at night on a weekday, so they had videoed it and empathized with it later on next evening.

"Where's Dave gone?" whispered Cranfield.

"David is going to provide us with a diversion by writing TAKE ME UP THE TUNNEL AND MAKE ME BLEED all over the carpet of the main entrance hall in his own wee. He has been tanking up on luminous purple dye for over a week. Of course, this means certain death. He is a very brave man."

"And what is the diversion for?" said Cranfield, suspecting he already knew.

Janine frowned. "David didn't tell you, then."

Cranfield shook his head.

"We suspect that She is being kept comatose. There are a number of drugs that cause continual catalepsy. It is my intention to search for traces of them in Her bodily fluids. If we can get proof that the Regents are keeping Her asleep out to the outside world, a new day will dawn for this country."

Cranfield, secretly relieved, feigned horror. "Rather you than me," he said.

She pushed a hand archly through the necklace she was wearing. "This twinset and pearls are hollowed-out containers for laboratory samples. At some point you'll need to distract attention from me by taking off your clothes or bugging little Leonardo or faking an epileptic fit or some such thing, while I pretend to drop my earring in the lake and scoop up a small quantity of the water."

Cranfield was mystified. "What good will that do?"

"Where do you think they put her body waste, genius? Granted, small samples of it go to doctors for painstaking analysis, but the greater part of it is piped out into the water. At the moment we are standing above ten concentrated years of Diana urine."

Cranfield peered around the lake, as if looking for traces of urine content. "Well, it certainly seems to be



good for rosemary."

"Rosemary," said the woman grimly. "That's for remembrance. Oh, WHOOPS, I've dropped an earring." She dropped demurely to a crouch, and raised her voice. "QUICK, HELP ME SEARCH FOR IT, IT WAS A RARE LATE GERALD RATNER 'CRAP' PIECE IN 18-CARAT GOLD AND IS WORTH MILLIONS."

An entire queue of fashion victims hunkered down as if playing Simon Says. The girl looked up at Cranfield, grinned and winked. The guard at the island end of the bridge waved Cranfield on.

*Now what do I do? I'm in uncharted territory, like a photographer from Hello! being shown round Lord and Lady X's Beautiful New Bondage Dungeon.*

A hand fell on his shoulder. He turned to stare into two horrible pools of mascara at the centre of which the presence of eyes might be presumed.

"They drove Her to Her death," said a cracked and red-lipped mouth. "They wouldn't stop hounding Her. Why couldn't they just leave Her *alone*?"

Baffled as to quite how to reply, Cranfield nodded vigorously and laid his own hand in turn on a bony, though padded shoulder. "I am with you, sister."

The hand gripped Cranfield's shoulder like a claw. "They won't leave me alone either. They get into my bed in the middle of the night. *Paparazzis*. We should be thankful She has been granted this lily-strewn dell of final peace." The mascara'ed creature flung its arms about itself at the 10,000-strong crowd filing in a floral-patterned galaxy round the yellow grass, glittering with constellations of camera flashes.

Cranfield continued to nod spasmodically until the guard cautioned the overdressed thing back with the butt of his gun and reversed the muzzle quickly to cover any sudden crowd surge. The guard grunted to Cranfield to continue.

*And here I am, about to be in the presence of Her. My companion from the CSA – pshaw! CSA! CIA, more like – is still taking her pitcher to the well. I have to provide a diversion, hopefully without killing myself.*

Another voice squawked in his left ear. "Hey! This is where the stiff is at! Zero Kelvin!"

*Bollocks. I forgot about Little Leonardo. And it's nearing his feeding time. If he doesn't get fed he could have a hypoglycaemic fit and do things he's even less responsible for than usual.* He felt in his inside pocket for the chocolate bar, reached out, tapped the kid on the shoulder with it. There were only ten more pilgrims to go before the thrilling prospect of gazing at the face of a 50-year-old bleached blonde vegetable from behind armoured glass.

"Touch me once more," said the kid through narrowed eyes, "and I'll have the police on you like you deserve, you old bastard." He took the proffered bar from Cranfield's hand, and Cranfield could only assume that the wrapper had left the bar before it vanished down his throat.

"Aren't you excited?" said his next-door neighbour in the queue. Cranfield turned to be faced with 20 excited giggling girlish faces wearing identical cardigans and STOP ALL WAR NOW badges. The giggling girlish faces were identical, down to the slightly pointy nose and the healthy

rosy cheeks. Cranfield shrank back in frank incomprehension. "I don't know, though," said another. "They say She's a lot smaller than She looks on television."

*They're wearing Princess of People's Hearts masks. Quite realistic, expensive ones, apparently.*

"Yes. There are rumours of osteoporosis, you know. I've been sending them extracts of my own hormones through the post. I like to do my bit."

*Oh my God. Those aren't masks. Those are Di Jobs.*

Now that Cranfield examined the faces in detail, he could see that many of the pointy noses were lopsided, having been put together by surgeons who were less skilled than the market average. *A nose contains a vast number of individual bits of gristle all packed in tight. Noses are very difficult to do. It's usually the nose that gives them away. Apart from the fact that the original that these are copies of has been lying in a coma for the last ten years, of course.*

Natural blondes had dyed their hair black, then re-dyed it blonde so that their dyed roots would show. Shameless cheeks had been made to blush by painstaking visits to the tattooist.

*That guard over by the gate looks like he's taking an interest in my companion. Come on, Cranfield. Are you for the Revolution, or against?*

And then, without really knowing what he was doing, he was turning round, facing the crowd, clearing his throat. In the old days, he remembered, teachers had been used to standing up in front of large hostile audiences and shouting at them. The guard, not used to people wanting to lag behind the crowd rather than push in, regarded him with blank simian puzzlement that Cranfield was sure would take mere microseconds to become psychopathic apeshit rage.

The unchocolatelike, unfoodlike odour of Leonardo's chocolate bar nudged insistently at Cranfield's nostrils. *What is it? I know that smell. Where do I know it from?*

"My friends! My dear dear friends! We are joined here in common adoration of our living Queen – for I do dare call her Queen –"

*I know that smell from childhood. Standing out in the open, with my dad, when grown men could still stand out in the open, in a big parkland, somewhere in London, watching something. Something high up in the sky. Something flying, brightly coloured, being controlled by a clever man on the ground. A kite? No, that wasn't it. No strings, but a remote control. A radio remote control.*

*A model aeroplane.*

"Hey!" Leonardo was spitting out chunks of brownness that smelt more like poo than chocolate. "This fucking stuff tastes foul!" The finger came in Cranfield's direction again. "YOU'RE TRYING TO FUCKING POISON ME!"

*Nitromethane. Used as a model-plane fuel–*

Cranfield was saved from confrontation with Leonardo. The guard on the entrance to the Mausoleum picked the boy up with one rippling forearm to gasps of indignation and swoons of delight from the crowd, turned him around, and set him going again in the direction of Her final resting place. As Leonardo walked into the Mausoleum, he was beginning to look distinctly unwell.

Cranfield desperately continued his oration. “ – and dear Prince Harry – in all of Britain today, surely there is not a kinder, sweeter, more gentlemanly – ”

– also used as a dragster fuel –

The kid began coughing inside the Mausoleum. Puking noises echoed out across the grass – puking noises that were not simply puking noises, but the sound of an alimentary canal stuck in a body it didn’t want to be in, and trying frantically to escape. Cranfield nipped smartly behind the huge figure of the guard on the bridge, thankful for mercies both small and large.

– also used, according to the New Member of the Resistance Welcome Pack, as –

“ – more dashing, handsomer 30-year... ah, 20-year-old – ”

The Mausoleum exploded.

A fountain of bricks shot up high into the air, watched by a mesmerized crowd. It was only as the bricks were beginning to come back down that the crowd appeared to realize the fountain was one of vitrified stone rather than of water, and grew turbulent in its panic. The bricks came down in a pitter-patter of spattering blood.

“ – SON of a BITCH.” Cranfield stared open-mouthed at the wreckage. A huge slab of armoured banking-counter glass had come to rest in a troupe of luckless, and now also headless, schoolgirls on the other side of the lake. The guard had been blown back against Cranfield like a fried egg in a hurricane, and now lay cradled in his arms. The sunny side of the guard had been almost completely flayed away. He gurgled through the remains of his lips. A credit to his regiment, he was still holding his rifle, though he was staring at it with apparent intense curiosity as to its purpose.

Elements of the crowd that were not yet dead were stirring behind Cranfield.

“He called Her a Bitch,” said one.

“Called Prince Harry a Son of a Bitch,” said another.

“Blatant disrespect for Her as has done so much for us these last ten years,” said a third.

Cranfield turned, his eyes ablaze.

“SHE’S BEEN LYING ON HER BACK ASLEEP FOR THE LAST TEN YEARS!” he snapped. “THE MOST BLOODY ORDINARY WOMAN IN THIS COUNTRY HAS DONE MORE FOR US!”

An indrawn breath of horror made its way round the entire circle of the crowd adjoining the lake.

“Don’t you talk to me like that,” said a voice. He heard the unmistakable *click* of a Stanley knife blade being born. Oddly, this did not faze Cranfield as much as it ought to have.

“SHE’S DEAD!” said Cranfield. “LOOK – SHE WAS A HUMAN BEING, LIKE YOU AND ME! DESPITE BEING AN ABSENT PARENT, AN ANOREXIC AND AN ADULTRESS, SHE WAS PROBABLY NOT EVEN A BAD HUMAN BEING! BUT YOU AREN’T BAD HUMAN BEINGS EITHER, AND IS ANYONE GOING TO WALK ROUND YOU IN CIRCLES THROWING FLOWERS AT YOU WHEN YOU DIE? SHE IS DEAD! FORGET HER! GO BACK TO YOUR OWN FAMILIES! TRY VISITING YOUR OWN MOTHER’S GRAVE FOR A CHANGE! DING DONG! THE BITCH IS DEAD!”

He stood there, quaking, waiting for the wool-rich lycra onslaught that he knew must follow. Then, one of the voices said:

“Dead?”

Another joined it. “Dead? Dead, is she? Let me see!”

The crowd began to push across the bridge, through the remains of several injured guardsmen.

“I want a piece of her hospital gown. Just a *little* piece, mind.”

Cranfield saw a Stanley knife, the same Stanley knife, descend towards the pool of blood in the centre of the mausoleum.

*I want one of her eyes. They were so beautifully blue. They’ll do it too.*

Cranfield stood, totally forgotten, while a tide of memorabilia-seekers flocked silently over the bridge as if hypnotized. Abruptly, as the amount of hospital gown remaining dwindled, the sounds of ripping fabric gave way to screams of ripping flesh as the souvenir-hunters fought over the corpse beneath the gown.



The American woman lay at the water’s edge. A great deal of blood had come out of her.

“I was supposed to die,” said Cranfield. “Wasn’t I? You weren’t collecting samples of Diana urine at all, were you?” He threw a dire accusation at the American. “*That wasn’t an ordinary chocolate bar I gave the kid at all, was it?*”

Weakly, Janine nodded. “The kid was full of one half of a binary explosive. The candy bar was a nitromethane precursor under thick thick chocolate. His mother had been dosing Leonardo with hydrazine alcopop for two hours, together with taste-suppressant drugs, before he got in the MPV. Don’t feel too bad about the kid. The things he’s done to his mother and to other kids are best not talked about in undesensitized company.”

“I know,” nodded Cranfield. “He was one of my own class. No one else in my class spells ‘motherfucker’ quite like Leonardo. And to think I thought I was working somewhere in the north. All those northern kids must have come down south with their Single Parents when the steel mill opened.”

Janine nodded, a nod which almost turned into a vomit. “Yeargh. We told Leonardo’s mother if she could get the gunk down him we’d take him away and give him Experimental Personality Correction Surgery and a new life a very long way away on a completely different continent. She signed papers delivering up her kid to the B. F. Skinner Institute for Electrogenital Brain-Readjustment in Orange County, California. Thought the gunk was a tranquillizer to make him go quietly. Was *very* pleased with the tub of methadone we supplied to ‘mix into it.’ You wouldn’t hit a weak and feeble woman, would you?”

Cranfield shrank from the idea. “I, erm, I think I might take a long time to get used to *that*. Erm, it’s a whole new world of opportunity, isn’t it?” He raised his hand experimentally and whooshed it through the air. “I could say, ‘My Tea Had Better Be on the Table When I Get Home or You, Erm, You’ll, Erm, Know What Non-Violent Restraint



Feels Like, Erm, Bitch'." He stopped to analyze his sentence structure.

The woman grinned. "Pathetic. But give it time. You'll be booting the One You Love down the stairs covered with blood before you know it."

Cranfield glowed with pride despite himself. "What happens now? Gigantic US invasion fleet poised to liberate the nation from across the Irish Sea?"

The woman's head oscillated gradually from side to side. "No. Langley rather thought that if they cut out the cancer, the body would heal itself. The Cult of Diana as a political force is spreading like wildfire even outside this country. Why, our own Senator Winfrey has driven 16 cars plus five motorized wheelchairs into assorted bridge-support pillars through flaming hoops over rows of buses across the Southern States alone over the last two years, and all for charity. And the election of President Bardot to the *Assemblée Nationale* took everybody by surprise. It's all rather a shame really. I'd have pushed for a nuke on Althorp at the very least."

Cranfield looked round and frowned at the mass of scrapping Maenads. "Are you sure the cancer isn't in every cell?"

"No. But I'm assured that Corrective Surgery's better than Radiation Therapy."

"You know, I saw Her talking on television once, when She was alive. I'm That Old, you know. She looked like quite a nice lady."

The woman shrugged. "Even if she hadn't been, the media would have made out she was. She was just someone to look up to. Me, I don't like having *anyone* to look up to. I like to see what I'm stepping in." She laughed, and coughed blood. "Oh my goodness," she said, staring down at her front. "Haemorrhagic happiness."

"What was Dave *really* going to do at the palace?" said Cranfield.

"Why, help our dear little Princes into the next world," cackled Janine. "Did you ever doubt it? We were *his* diversion."

Suddenly, the Stately Home on the horizon flashed as if somebody had switched on all its lights in the dark. A cloud of broken glass and wrought iron flicked out across the lawn like a great grey paw, swiping aerobics instructors from the air as they stepped and leapt. By the time it reached Cranfield and Janine, however, it was only a breeze making the grass bow down before it.

"Time for you to go now," said Janine, nodding in the direction of a small group of plus-foured Bacchantes crossing the bridge, some of whose heads were turned hungrily in Cranfield's direction. "Time for me to go too." She squeezed Cranfield's hand. Cranfield had not even known he was holding her hand.

"You, young lady," retorted Cranfield, "are in *no* state to go *anywhere*."

"Ah, but there is one place I am still welcome," said Janine. "I don't believe anyone has ever been turned away from it, in fact." She appeared to be trying to bite out one of her back teeth, a singularly difficult exercise. "Go now. Leave me and save yourself. This rear offside molar's full of cyanide, flavoured with toffee fudge frost-

ing. You get a better type of poison capsule working for US Intelligence."

With the precision of a dental practitioner, Cranfield inserted a finger into the back of her mouth. Obliging, she did not bite down on it.

"Ing going to frow up ig you do gat."

"Uh-uh," said Cranfield, wagging his head wisely from side to side. "New Member of the Resistance Welcome Pack, page 354 – Escape to the Welcoming Arms of a Hostile Foreign Power. New Brother/Sister in Arms/Passive Resistance (Delete As Appropriate)! Do Not Fear! In the event of your reaching the 33rd Degree (Grand Illuminated Brown Owl) in our Struggle, neither death nor serious injury can befall you. If Tools of the Oppressors are closing upon you, simply dislodge your false left upper molar no. 2, which will begin to emanate a homing signal for your retrieval. You and anyone in your immediate vicinity will be instantaneously teleported to our Agent Retrieval Centre using advanced space technology. Please have your UK papers and any stolen secret government documents ready for processing."

"Ratsh," she said. "You reag page 354."

"I'm a speed reader," he said. "I'm amazed that you believed that guff. Instantaneous teleportation indeed. As if the United States government would waste billions of dollars of technology teleporting one little Resistance agent out of the clutches of the enemy –"

"Oh, *ngo*," she said. "Ge radio teef we gig to the Reshishtanshe exklode wheng actigated." She stared up into the sky as if expecting Ronald Reagan coming down from Heaven in the Rapture. "Gut *Ing* CIA. *Ngy* toof'sh going to worg *fine*."

"Sorry to rain on your wake," said Cranfield, "but I feel the only Agent Retrieval Centre your tooth is designed to teleport you to is the big one in the sky. My only hope is that, when your tooth goes off, we can take a number of these charming ladies with us." He kept his finger firmly on the molar.

Janine stared sideways in real terror at the closing circle of Dianalogues. "Granshield. Leg me go. Leg me go *now*, or I gill *bite* you."

Cranfield regarded his imminent doom with a bored expression. "Oh, I don't think so."

The nearest Dianalogues leapt. Cranfield took his finger off the tooth. There was a flash of blinding white light.



Cranfield wiped after-images of gleaming knifeblades from his eyes, and looked up from Janine.

"Golly," he gasped. "Mr President."

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**Dominic Green**, an *Interzone* discovery of some years ago, lives in Northampton. His last five stories here were "That Thing Over There" (IZ 132), which was taken by U.S. editor David Hartwell for reprinting in his best-of-the-year anthology, "Dream Blue Murder" (IZ 145), "Something Chronic" (IZ 159), "Rude Elves and Dread Norse Reindeer" (IZ 162) and "Grass" (IZ 168).

# After Postville

*Thomas M. Disch*

**I**t was a grey, blowy April day, and there wasn't a moving car anywhere along the length of Main Street, north or south, and not a soul on the sidewalks, with the exception of the young man in the yarmulke on the curb standing outside Pathmark and bowing rhythmically in the direction of the Corner Cafe across the street. He looked as though he wanted to cross the street but couldn't. As though he were tethered to that particular block of concrete by some invisible linkage that only allowed enough wiggle-room to maintain his bob-bob-bobbing motion, like one of those birds from a novelty store that dips into a water glass, and tips back, and dips again.

Terry had sometimes peeked inside Mount Zion Yeshiva and watched the Jews inside possessed by the same strange rictus while they read their little prayer books. It seemed comical, as though the whole roomful of grown men were desperate to go to the bathroom but someone was already in there – forever. After a while Terry had felt sad, as when he'd watched the television documentary about Bellevue Mental Hospital in New York City, where a mob of people, men and women, lined the corridors, some seated, some standing, and all writhing to a tune audible to no one else. Some blissed out, some wretched, but all off the wall. All throwing their lives away for no good reason like this poor fellow transfixed in front of the Pathmark.

Finally Terry walked up to him and asked, "Is there some way I can help you? Do you want to cross the street?"

The guy went on with his bobbing motion, refusing even to glance in Terry's direction, the only indications he had heard him a slightly more fraught cording in his neck, a more determined clenching of his right hand over his left wrist.

This was typical behaviour among Postville's Hasidic newcomers. For them the other residents of Postville simply didn't exist. They didn't say Hi, they didn't wave, they almost didn't slow down for you if they were in one of their minivans and you were crossing the street. It went beyond unfriendly, but it was all theoretically okay because it was based on their religious faith as Jews, plus the fact that their ancestors had been killed by the Ger-

mans in the Holocaust. Before they'd come to town to open up their slaughterhouse, Postville had been something like 50 per cent German, so you could understand why they might be unforthcoming, why they would just look at the hand being offered them to shake and think... Unclean! You could tell that was what they were thinking by the puckering of their lips.

And as to their not eating at the Corner Cafe or anywhere else in Postville, that's because they were Orthodox and would only eat kosher food of the sort they made a business of. They also couldn't use plates or silverware that had ever touched non-kosher food, which of course were all the plates and silverware in Postville but their own. Plus they had their own weird clothes that they could not have bought at any store in Iowa that Terry had ever been into. Now they even had their own garage that charged ten cents less a gallon for premium, and that's where they all went, as a result of which Fred & Frieda's was slowly going out of business, what with one customer after another opting for the nameless new filling station where two Mexicans worked the pumps.

"Hello," Terry said again. "Do you need help getting to the other side?"

This time the guy let his head tilt back at the upward limit of his bob, and his eyes rolled sideways in an expression of polite despair. "Go away," he said in a raspy voice. "Just go. Go!"

"It's sad," Terry volunteered, "about the fire."

"I can't hear you!"

"I only ever saw the outside of the synagogue. And you couldn't tell much from that. Just the concrete and the hedges. But it probably looked nice inside. Right?"

The man pressed his eyes tight closed and increased the tempo of his bobbing.

"I mean, why build a church at all unless it's going to look special in some way? Or a synagogue. My name is Terry, by the way." He held out his hand. "Terry Goren."

The eyes stayed shut, the bobbing continued.

"And what's your name?" Terry insisted.

The man froze. His eyes opened. When he spoke, it was as though a dentist were pulling each word from his



mouth. "I am David Golden."

"You're dead, David. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Yes, you are," said Terry, choosing to interpret his No as denial rather than a straightforward answer to the question he'd been asked. "You died in the explosion that destroyed the synagogue. That was a month ago. The wreckage has already been cleared away." He nodded in the direction of the charred open space at the far end of Main Street, across from the sign (now highly inaccurate) that welcomed visitors to Postville, Iowa, Population, 1,480.

"And your body has been cremated," Terry went on. "As much of you as they could find."

David Golden bowed his head and closed his eyes and recommenced his rocking motion. A gust of wind lifted a tattered yellow plastic carrier bag from the gutter – a rarity in Postville for there to be such refuse on the street – and whirled it about the inconsolable ghost. Briefly Terry forgot David Golden and savoured the fleeting instant, the wreathing interplay of plastic and ectoplasm.

Then he resumed his task as Postville's awakener and guide to the afterlife, its Hermes Hypnopompe. Slowly, with many repetitions, like a schoolteacher teaching the multiplication tables, he instructed David Golden in the laws governing his altered existence, how he must remain in Postville until, like compost worked into a garden's soil, he had been entirely assimilated, until the wind and rain had worn away all that was dross and his spirit could at last see clearly the shape of the life it had lost. This, Terry told him, would probably take a long time, for the shape of any life is a function of the lives in which it is enmeshed, and often there is a great tangle to unravel.

"None of this," said David Golden, "pertains to me. I'm Jewish."

"Do you want me to help you across the street?" Terry asked again.

"I don't want anything from you. And I don't want to be 'assimilated' into your goyish shithole. Is that clear? I don't see how I could make it any clearer." A single precious tear moistened his stubbled cheek.

But Terry insisted. "We must learn to be friends, David. Here – give me your hand."

He extended his own hand, palm up, and David, who could not act otherwise, placed his left hand in Terry's. They both stared at the object of shredded flesh and splintered bone as though it were an item of ritual significance, a pyx or scroll whose esoteric markings must be pondered and taken to heart.

But for now it was inscrutable, mere meat like the beef or lamb that was dressed and blessed, packaged, frozen and shipped from the Jews' kosher slaughterhouse. Terry handed it back to David Golden with a sense of embarrassment, as though he had accidentally touched the man's genitals. Then he went across the street, leaving David rocking back and forth with a grief that had begun to be conscious, though still it was silent.

Terry knew when someone could see him, because it was

only then that he could see himself – as now, mirrored in the shop windows of Main Street, kitted out with cap and bandana and his full panoply of merit badges, from Agribusiness to Space Exploration, with stops along the way for Leatherwork, Shotgun Shooting, and, last but not least, Disabilities Awareness. He'd taken on Disabilities Awareness at the behest of his scoutmaster and pastor at the Lutheran church, Jim Quist (whose wife Elaine was in a wheelchair with MS), thinking it would be another easy score like Consumer Buying or Dog Care. It had turned out to be the single most useful merit badge on his bandolier, the one that had paid the biggest dividends in the afterlife.

Each badge was emblem of some essential mystery, the one thing you learn that is the key in the lock of that skill or study and which once you know it you'll never forget. For the Disabilities Awareness badge that secret was that we are all disabled. There are shelves we can't reach, doors we can't open, languages we can't speak – something that makes us *unable* to fit in no matter what kind of effort we make. Elaine Quist had helped Terry understand that, though, as she had also said, quite truly, "It's a lesson we all get taught in due course, without outside help."

She had a particular way of smiling when she said that that Terry had come to recognize as the Disabilities Awareness look. Also known as a wry smile, a sour grin, or sadder but wiser. It was a look you saw on almost all those newly dead when they realized that all their plans for the future had not just been put on hold, they were cancelled. That trip to Dubuque to see Aunt Marianne for one last time would never happen. The bulbs from Gurney's would never be planted. That last jar of corn relish from 1996 would never get brought up from the cellar, never be opened, never tasted.

Those were the losses that mattered most to the newly dead, not the things that got people riled up on talk radio. Once they were past the first shock, the bombshell announcing that they were at most only onlookers now, they stopped taking an interest in the official concerns of good citizens. Terry was an exception to the rule in that regard. He'd earned three of his merit badges for Citizenship (Citizenship in the Community, in the Nation, and in the World) and the habit of being a concerned citizen had stayed with him. Perhaps it was the thing that kept him especially glued to the here and now of Postville in the Third Millennium and allowed him to act as a latter-day Charon, ferrying the dead, once they were ready, to the other side. That, and a basic inclination to be helpful.

So here he was on the main street of Postville, looking at himself with astonishment in the front window of Mamie's Thrift Shop and Video Rentals (which, sadly, hadn't been open for business for the last two years). After blinking away his surprise, he scanned Main Street to see who it was who was looking at him. Usually you know at a glance. On a street of living people a dead person sticks out like a sore thumb. But not today. There was the usual crowd of Mexicans hanging out in front of Cucina Linda and two bearded rabbis dragging their

male offspring along at a brisk pace, as though pursued (the Jewish women, young and old, lived in some kind of purdah, and were less often seen on the streets of Postville, except in pairs, pushing strollers and sporting almost identical wigs, as their religion required). There were even one or two indigenes, very old, very slow, rather sad. But where amidst this usual spectrum of Postville's diversities was the dead somebody who had taken note of Terry?

There: half hidden round the corner of the Corner Cafe, the spectre of Rabbi Irving Rosen, the oldest undeparted victim of the bombing of Mount Zion Synagogue and Terry's favourite Jew. Rabbi Rosen had been hard to spot, because instead of having his attention fixed on Terry, the only other ghost in the area, he was watching the Corner Cafe's sole customer, George Scully, tucking away a burger and fries and chatting with Deborah Carr, the lunchtime waitress. George was giving most of his attention to the burger, because it was still oozing juices from the grill and his shirt was fresh that morning and had to last another couple of days.

"Rabbi Rosen," said Terry, crossing the untrafficked street, "good morning. Enjoying the June weather?"

The rebbe's tongue darted from the right side of his mouth, even as his lips puckered in a wincing Disabilities Awareness smile. The look seemed more at home on his face than on the faces of newly dead goyim of Postville for whom irony was a novel sensation. He hadn't had to die to develop a sense of humour.

"Yes," Rosen answered, "but I wish I could enjoy that hamburger instead."

"Hungry," said Terry. An observation, not a question.

"Should a dead man salivate like this? The longer I am dead the worse the hunger gets."

"Would you feel the same if he were eating pork?"

Rosen laughed. "If you don't like kosher law, go argue with Moses. But to answer your question: yes. Starvation is no respecter of law. If he were shovelling down the shit of a pig and not its spiced ground flesh I'd feel the same envy in my gut. Whatever my tongue could taste I would lick with pleasure. They built Auschwitz to teach that lesson to the living. The dead can learn it for free." He stroked his gnarled, red-and-grey beard as a kind of seal, or *Selah*, to his brief lamentation.

"I don't suppose you've ever eaten anything at the Corner Cafe."

"No. And that is a sign of what? That I disdain your town, your people, your faith?"

"Is it, Rabbi Rosen?"

Again, but chillier, the laugh; the flick of the tongue; the smile that mocked all miseries. "Of course it is. I can't deny it, if I wanted to. But why should I want to? What pleasure have I now but honesty? Don't *you* despise this town, these people, a faith that proved untrue?"

The compulsion to speak the truth was not reciprocal, and Terry did not have to answer the rebbe's questions. He just stood there in his scout uniform, the politest of interrogators.

"This town was dying, you know, when we came here," the rebbe went on. "It was moribund, almost bankrupt.

Only the taxes *we* paid kept it alive. Our taxes kept the schools open, though our children don't attend them."

"And how did you vote on the bond issues?"

"Oh, we were against more money for your football teams and uniforms and the computers and *hockey rink*. You wrang all that out of us. Then, once the Mexicans were here in force – Vloosh! the school budget soared into outer space like a rocketship. There was no stopping the progress of Education then."

"And who brought the Mexicans to Postville? Whose slaughterhouse gave them jobs? Who built their trailer camps?"

The rebbe shrugged. "Who else? But who else, my little eagle scout, would do the work? The jobs were there, but no one who grew up in Postville was hungry enough to stoop so low. Eight dollars an hour wouldn't do for a white man. But Mexicans are very hungry, and there are millions of them. Do you think your goyish meat-packers pay *better* wages?"

"You enjoyed it. You enjoyed turning Postville into a third-world barrio."

"Is that a question? Then the answer is yes. Poetic justice is always enjoyable – for those not on the receiving end. Have the good citizens of Postville merited a kinder fate by their love and charity, by the splendour of their civilization, by the beauty and dignity of their public buildings? When your ancestors took these lands from the Winnebagos or whatever tribe of savages first lived here, was there a solemn pact to guarantee that their children would hold these acreages forever and ever?"

"Like Israel's pact with Jehovah?"

"Precisely! You begin to understand. There is a time for everything, my junior-league Hermes. A time to live and a time to die; a time to invest, and a time to die; a time to welcome your neighbours from the South, and a time to die. For Postville it is the time to die. But from its ashes Nuevo Pueblo will arise, with its new people, its new customs and cooking, its madder music and more powerful recreational drugs."

"And *my* people – will they have any place in this brave new mondo?"

"Oh yes!" said Rabbi Rosen, giving a lupine inflection to his Disabilities Awareness grin. "There!" He pointed to the little cemetery abutting St Jacobi's Lutheran Church. "In your graves. Like us."

He spoke with no sense of resignation but rather a kind of glee, a cheer that transcended mere Schadenfreude to become something sweet and philosophic. That glee was the reason, for all his dyspepsia and open ill-will, that Terry liked the old fellow. Despite the difference in their ages and backgrounds, they really had a lot in common.

"Let me ask you a question," said Rabbi Rosen. "Why are you here, a Boy Scout, with all this grown-up responsibility?"

Terry was not compelled to answer, but like most of us he was pleased when someone else was curious. "I'm not a Boy Scout any more," he said quietly.

The rebbe chuckled. "You could fool me."

"I do still wear the uniform. It meant a lot to me. I had



nearly all the merit badges I needed to be an eagle scout."

"And then – what? So young, it must have been a high-way accident. Or some one-in-a-million kind of cancer?"

"I committed suicide," said Terry, "when I realized that I was gay."

Rabbi Rosen nodded and stroked his beard. Slowly his feeling of incipient sympathy for this dead goy became a feeling of revulsion – and of horror at his own situation, adrift in an afterlife for which he lacked any map or compass, a Jew with no homeland but this Iowa cow pasture, no comforter but a queer.

"Do you want to hear something completely crazy?" said Deborah Carr as she plunked down a cup of coffee and a slice of pie on the counter in front of George Scully.

He didn't, but that was part of the deal when you ate at the Corner Cafe. You listened to what Deborah had to say.

"What," said George.

"You will never guess who I thought I just saw, standing out in front of here."

"Who."

"Terry Goren."

George swallowed the wrong way, choked, brought up the bolus of chewed apple pie and let it lodge inside his cheek, tobacco-like – while he scalded his throat with too-hot black coffee.

"Remember him?"

George nodded. He remembered him all right. They had been best friends in high school until the kid had revealed his sick secret.

"Jesus," said George. "What made you think of him? He's been dead since... since when?"

"Nineteen seventy-eight. The year Sharon Gates moved to Chicago. Who knows why you suddenly remember anyone from a long time ago. You were a friend of his, maybe that's why."

"A friend? Not really."

Terry Goren had blown his brains out with a shotgun in the Gorens' garage. No one ever knew why, officially, though George had a good idea.

"Such a crazy thing to do," said Deborah. "I could never understand it. He must of been unhappy with Postville."

"Uh-huh."

"Some people don't fit in."

"Right."

"But he could of gone to Chicago, like Sharon Gates. She's got a good job there now, better than any you could get in Postville."

George nodded vigorously and swallowed the last of his pie. It was time to be getting back to the feed store.

"I don't understand how someone could do that."

"Uh-huh." George took three bills from his wallet and laid them on the counter. Then a quarter on top, his tip.

"I can understand someone leaving Postville for a better job. Unless you work for the Jews there's no jobs here. Unless, maybe, a teacher. But I don't see myself as a teacher. I don't have the patience."

"The Jews aren't the problem," said George. "The Mexicans are the problem. This whole state is going to become another god-damn Mexico."

"Language," chided Deborah.

"A Mexico with snow."

"Well, just be glad you don't have kids. They're the ones that will bear the brunt."

"I do have kids."

"Well, yeah. But not in Postville. Not any more."

George pushed himself up from the counter and reached inside his pants to adjust his boxer shorts.

"Hey," said Deborah. "The Men's Room is over there."

George had no comeback. He just let his gut sag back in place and headed for the screen door. Outside a gust of wind lifted up a yellow plastic carrier bag and danced it around the void of Main Street. The Mexicans outside Cucina Linda gave him a dirty look and then, with more deliberate discourtesy, looked away. It was their way of telling him that he did not exist.

Thomas M. Disch won a Hugo Award for his non-fiction book *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (1998), and he is a longtime contributor to *Interzone*. The above new story, "After Postville," first appeared very recently in a New York City weekly tabloid paper, the *New York Press* (5-11 September 2001). According to the author, "It was inspired by an hour-long PBS TV documentary called *Postville* that laid out the basic situation. So, a fantasy as it may seem, it is largely fact-based."

# interzone

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### THE TALKING DEAD

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The 2001 Hugo Awards, presented at the World SF Convention in Philadelphia, provided two shocks. One was administered to fans who believe that fantasy (though traditionally eligible) shouldn't win Hugos, as achieved this year by J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. The other shock was for me, when the short-story award went to my own "Different Kinds of Darkness" from *F&SF*. I never thought I could possibly win for fiction. Still too stunned to offer any witty comment, I merely list the rest. Novella: Jack Williamson, "The Ultimate Earth" – another record, since Williamson is 93. Novelette: Kristine Kathryn Rusch, "Millennium Babies." Related Book: Bob Eggleton & Nigel Suckling, *Greetings from Earth: The Art of Bob Eggleton*. Dramatic Presentation: *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* – whose director Ang Lee, unlike J. K. Rowling, sent a charming note of thanks and apology for not being there to accept. Editor: Gardner Dozois of *Asimov's* – who often makes Chestertonian jokes about his own girth, and was rewarded by a revelation in his local paper the *Philadelphia Inquirer*: "In the world of science fiction, Gardner Dozois is huge." Artist: Bob Eggleton. Semiprozine: *Locus*. Fanzine: *File 770*. Fan Writer: me again. Fan Artist: Teddy Harvia.

## THE TWO-TIMERS

**Pat Cadigan** reports that she is "Now Officially British, as stated in *Publishers Weekly*."

**Jon Courtenay Grimwood** was crushed by confirmation that "being an SF writer really is the lowest of the low... I've just had a cat breeder in Surrey refuse to let me have a pedigree cat because he was worried by the content of my web-page."

**Sir Fred Hoyle** (1915-2001), noted astronomer of unorthodox but influential views (in particular the steady state theory and galactic panspermia), died on 20 August aged 86, following a severe stroke in July. His sf career began with *The Black Cloud* (1957) and was most publicly visible in the 1961 BBC TV series *A for Andromeda* and its sequel *The Andromeda Breakthrough*, both co-written and novelized with John Elliott. Other solo sf works of note are *Ossian's Ride* (1959) and *October the First is Too Late* (1966); Hoyle co-authored several more sf novels with his son Geoffrey, from 1963 to 1982. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1957 and was knighted in 1972.

**Gwyneth Jones** was dismayed when her story "The Salt Box" (*IZ* 169) led to a police raid on *Interzone* HQ. That



is, an apologetic policewoman came to pick up a copy of that issue from editor David Pringle, following a reader's complaint that the story – an inoffensive extract from Jones's new novel *Bold as Love* – amounted to child pornography. Perhaps the prudish complainer doesn't know that Nabokov's *Lolita* has been egregiously in print in Britain since 1959?

**Philip Pullman's** *The Amber Spyglass* appeared on the "longlist" of 24 Booker Prize finalists, officially released for the first time this year. This caused some media flurry and hasty criticism like Suzi Feay's *Independent on Sunday* comment that "the Satan figure, Lord Asriel, leader of the rebellion against God, is noble and freedom-loving"... not the first words that would occur to anyone who'd read the end of book one.

**Michael Swanwick** brags about many series commissions to write short stories at monthly, weekly, biweekly, and for all I know hourly intervals: "Are you intimidated yet?" I certainly am.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Publishers & Sinners.** *Aboriginal SF* is reportedly ceasing publication, with inventory stories to appear in sister magazine *Absolute Magnitude*.

**Howl's Movie Castle.** Diana Wynne Jones gloats fire-demonically: "I can at last reveal – having been forbidden to by the contract until now – that the Japanese Studio Ghibli, makers of *Laputa* and *Princess Mononoke*, are doing a film of *Howl's Moving Castle*. Really."

**Take That, Joe Haldeman!** "The best-known example of 'future war' fiction is *The Invasion of 1910* by William Tufnell Le Queux, a rich slice of scaremongering which was a sensational success when published in 1906." (Rupert Forbes, *The London Review of Books*, 6 Sep. 2001)

**Take That, Keith Roberts!** A Real Critic looks at Kingsley Amis's homage to *Pavane*: "The *Alteration* (1976) invites comparisons with Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with an echo of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*." (Richard Bradford, *Lucky Him: The Life of Kingsley Amis*, 2001; no mention at all of Roberts or *Pavane*.)

**More Awards** presented at the Worldcon. *Sidewise*, for alternate history – Short: Ted Chiang, "Seventy-Two Letters." Long: Mary Gentle, *The Book of Ash*. ... *Spectrum*, for gay-friendly sf – Novel: David Gerrold, *Jumping off the Planet*. Other: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery*, first presentation: Olaf Stapledon. (Er, when did he get lost?) ... *Prometheus*, for libertarian sf: L. Neil Smith, *Forge of Elders*. ... *Retro Hugos* for 1950 work – Novel: Heinlein, *Farmer in the Sky*. Novella: Heinlein, "The Man Who Sold the Moon." Novelette: Kornbluth, "The Little Black Bag." Short: Knight, "To Serve Man." Dramatic: *Destination Moon*; Editor Campbell; Artist Freas; Fan Writer: Silverberg – who was 15 at the time, had written little, and through no fault of his own appears to have been landed with a Subsequent Career Hind-sight award. Fanzine: *Science Fiction News Letter*. Fan Artist: Jack Gaughan.

**Worldcon 2004.** Following site selection voting in Philadelphia, the 62nd Worldcon will be Noreascon 4 in Boston, 2-6 September 2004. Guests are Terry Pratchett, William Tenn, Jack Speer and Peter Weston. Contact PO Box 1010, Framingham, MA 01701, USA. E-mail [info@mcfi.org](mailto:info@mcfi.org).

**World Fantasy Awards** novel shortlist: *Declare*, Tim Powers; *Galveston*, Sean Stewart; *The Grand Ellipse*, Paula Velsky; *The Amber Spyglass*, Philip Pullman; *Lord of Emperors*, Guy Gavriel Kay; *Perdido Street Station*, China Miéville. British contenders in other categories include *Dark Terrors 5* ed Jones & Sutton (anthology), M. John Harrison's *Travel Arrangements* (collection), Jim Burns (artist), and critic Tom Shippey (special award).

**Thog's Masterclass.** "I looked at Norathar, who was staring at Alieria with eyes like mushrooms." (Steven Brust, *Yendi*, 1984) "Despite his slant eyes and yellow skin, he proved to be quite a likeable fellow as well as an erudite scientist." (Captain S. P. Meek, "Awlo of Ulm," 1931) "Fear exploded in her mouth like a drug." (Linda Nagata, *Limits of Vision*, 2001) "The barest flicker of anguish passed over his eternally immobile mouth." "Then a horrid, unforgettable giggle bit at his unbelievable left ear." (both Charles Harness, *The Paradox Men*, 1953)

# FARCE

## RETROSPECTIVE

### Connie Willis interviewed by Nick Gevers



*Connie Willis is one of American science fiction's most popular and critically lauded writers, the winner of numerous awards. Her sparkling lightness of style (masking considerable depth of implication), her finely choreographed descriptions of humorous misadventure and incomprehension, her mastery of complex plotting, her impressive technical versatility: all make her oeuvre one to savour.*

*Her major novels are: Lincoln's Dreams (1987); Doomsday Book (1992); the latter's very loose sequel in the Oxford/Dunworthy series, To Say Nothing of the Dog (1997); and Passage (2001, recently published in the UK by Voyager). Intensely realized time travel, objective or subjective, dominates all of these books, to beguiling yet disturbing tragicomic effect. Book-length novellas are Remake (1994), Uncharted Territory (1994), and Bellwether*

*(1996); and Willis's acclaimed short fiction, characterized by a very distinctive frothy profundity, is collected in Fire Watch (1984), Impossible Things (1993), and Miracle and Other Christmas Stories (1999). In addition, in collaboration with Cynthia Felice, she has written three relatively unambitious sf novels, Water Witch (1982), Light Raid (1989), and Promised Land (1997).*

*Willis's big new novel, Passage, is a long, extremely busy, intricately through-composed examination of Near-Death Experiences and their basis in imagination and memory, all against the backdrop of a wittily depicted and highly chaotic contemporary American hospital. This book, and her abiding literary influences and concerns, were the subjects of my e-mail interview with Connie Willis, conducted in July-August 2001.*



NG: By the evidence of the numerous awards you've won and the great affection in which you're held in the sf field, you are the definitive contemporary American sf author, or certainly something approaching that. How would you react to such a contention?

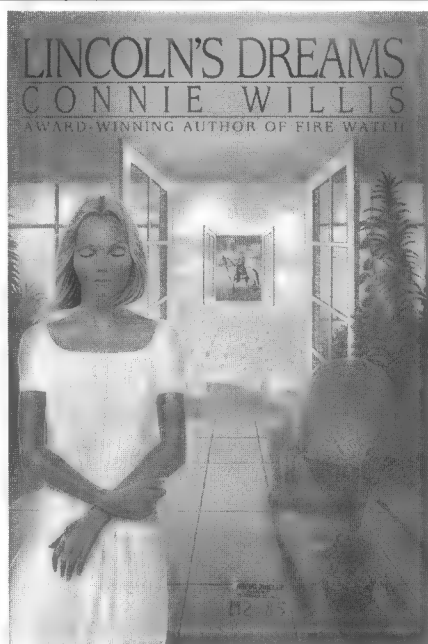
CW: The definitive contemporary American sf writer? Are you sure? I don't see how that's possible when everyone I meet either (A) has never heard of me, or (B) thinks what I write isn't science fiction. I met one guy so incensed about *Bellwether* that he told me I should give back all my Nebulas and Hugos, and a reviewer just said *Passage* wasn't science fiction either. It isn't? How can it not be? We don't actually have people crossing over to the Other Side, do we?

Anyway, I don't believe there is such a thing as a definitive sf writer, and if there was, who would it be? Isaac Asimov? Ursula Le Guin? Philip K. Dick? Ray Bradbury? None of those people wrote anything like each other – and none of them wrote like Robert A. Heinlein (my vote for definitive if there was such a thing, which there isn't) or William Tenn or Howard Waldrop or Ben Bova or John Wyndham or Zenna Henderson. Oh, and I forgot Harlan Ellison. And Shirley Jackson. And...

The thing I have always liked best about science fiction is that it defies definition. It keeps constantly reinventing itself – and just when you thought stories about robots or time travel or first contact had been done to death, it thinks of some brand-new way to tell an old story, or some brand-new story to tell. And there seems to be no end in sight. This is, after all, the field that gave us "Flowers for Algernon" and *Neuromancer* and "The Cold Equations" and *Bring the Jubilee*. And who knows what next?

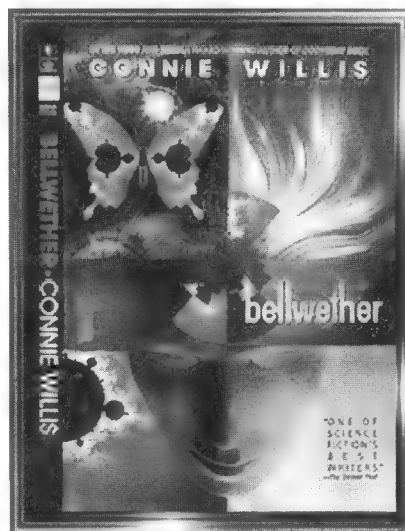
NG: In most of your work, there's a texture of screwball comedy – helter-skelter activity on the part of your characters, often misguided; misunderstandings; clashing perceptions; absurd coincidences. What motivates this humorous textual surface? What has inspired it?

CW: Helter-skelter, misguided activity, misunderstandings, absurd coincidences. That doesn't sound like screwball comedy to me. It sounds like the human condition. We poor *homo sapiens* are always trying to make desperately important decisions with too little information and too little time. And in spite of our best attempts at controlling our own destinies, we are constantly the victims of fate, chance, mortality, and our own very faulty hardwiring. Which is why my characters always seem so muddled – that's how I see the species. We'd love to be heroes, but it



actually takes all our effort to just keep our feet and figure out what's going on.

It's also why I love screwball comedies (well, that and the fact that Cary Grant is in so many of them). To name a few favourites: *Walk, Don't Run* (the very good remake of the very good *The More the Merrier*), *His Girl Friday*, *Father Goose*, *Six Days, Seven Nights* (which doesn't have Cary in it but does have Harrison Ford), *French Kiss*, and *The Sure Thing* (a lovely remake of the granddaddy of them all, *It Happened One Night*), and *While You Were Sleeping*. I consider myself a connoisseur of the genre, which means I'm death on movies that I don't think follow the rules (or break the rules in interesting and intelligent ways.) I hate comedies that are too sophisticated – the heart of the screwball comedy is actually a very old-fashioned love story, and you are allowed to laugh at anything and anyone except the love the main characters feel for each other. I also hate comedies that don't lavish as much care and



attention on their minor characters as they do on the leads, and those that rely on so-called "funny situations" (i.e., wearing a woman's negligee – except when Cary Grant does it in *Bringing Up Baby*) instead of on the script. Wit is the key to comedy. Writing.

NG: The plots of your major novels, in line with this screwball spirit, are fast-moving yet enormously complicated. How easy is it to juggle so many intricately interlocked elements, at such length?

CW: How easy is it to juggle all the elements of my plots? Hard. Real hard. Lie-awake-at-night hard. And then when you do get to sleep, waking up in a cold sweat because you've forgotten something hard. I love complicated plots, with gobs of foreshadowing and red herrings and seemingly irrelevant subplots that come together at the end with a bang, but they're a huge pain to write. People often ask me if I know the ending when I start writing, and I stare at them in blank dismay. Of course I know the ending. How could I possibly write without knowing where it was going? I hear about writers who just get an idea or an image and then take off, but to me this sounds as smart as starting off across the Gobi Desert with no map and no canteen, although to give these other writers credit, they seem to do fine. I, on the other hand, would sink in the sand and never be heard from again.

I work a lot like Agatha Christie (I try to write, actually, a lot like Agatha Christie) who used to plot out her entire novel while doing housewifish things like doing the dishes, taking six months or so to put it all together (though with me it's sometimes years and years – I worked on the plot of *Passage* for nearly two years before I was able to overcome all the construction problems – and that was several years after I'd had the original idea) and only starting the actual writing when the plot was all in place. During the plotting period I take endless notes, most of them beginning with "maybe he could..." or "maybe when they first meet, she could say..." Most of these are terrible ideas, which I don't end up using, but they help me get to the ideas I want.

The writing itself is just a big pain – lots of lists. Lists of what has to happen in this scene, lists of how much time has elapsed, lists of things to do in the next chapter. Without lists (and waking up in the middle of the night) I could never write the book. I felt immensely better after I found out that Fitzgerald made lists, too.

NG: You seem to have a jaundiced view of large institutions – universities and

hospitals certainly (as featured in your longer novels.) However well-intentioned they are at root, you depict them as chaos incarnate. Again, flawed humanity at work?

CW: I have a jaundiced view of pretty much everything, especially anything involving people in groups – churches, government, business, refreshments committees, you name it. Nobody can be trusted to be in charge, as far as I'm concerned, and once people organize themselves into groups, no matter how well-intentioned, (and I mean everything from corporations to church choirs to antique car clubs) they make a mess of everything and can only be saved by the actions of the individual (look at Watergate, for instance). I don't know why this is exactly, something wrong in our hardwiring maybe, and it doesn't mean I'm an anarchist, it just means I think a little healthy scepticism is in order. Somebody after reading *Bellwether* said, very incensed, "It seems like the whole point of your book is that people need to think for themselves!" Yes, as a matter of fact, that's what I do think.

NG: Another consistent thread in your major solo novels is the contemplation of the past, whether through the medium of dreams, time travel, or psychiatric metaphor. Your characters are voluntary or involuntary historians; why so much retrospection?

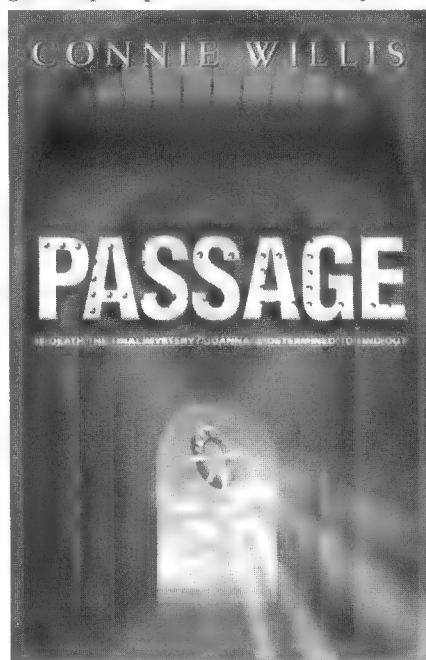
CW: I love the past. For one thing, I think I was born in the wrong century – and no, I do not believe in reincarnation! I came of age in the 1960s and thought they were possibly the stupidest decade of all time – for examples of sheep-like behaviour, the Summer of Love simply cannot be beat – and I despise most of 20th-century literature (I like Fitzgerald; and Sigrid Undset), lots of the clothes, and nearly everything that passes for thought. EST, for instance, and the Contract with America, and the inner child. As Humphrey Bogart says in the original *Sabrina* (the remake doesn't have Audrey Hepburn in it, but it does have Harrison Ford), "You could come up with a better century by pulling one out of a hat." So of course I like the past.

But the real appeal of the past is that it's the true forbidden country. Even when you write stories about the Outer Magellanic Cloud or the star pillars in Orion, there's a chance we can go there, and we know we'll get to the future eventually, one way or another, but the past you can never go to, not even to correct your mistakes. It's the place you can't ever go home to, even to take one last longing look, and yet it's always with us, every moment. *Peggy Sue Got Married* is a pretty terrible

movie, but it has one moment of true greatness. Kathleen Turner, transported through a knock on the head into her own teenaged past, picks up the phone, and then gasps, "Grandma, oh, Grandma," as she hears the voice of her dead grandmother, and all the love, the longing, the sorrow of things past is in that one line. The past is about loss and love and all the things we didn't appreciate when we had the chance, all the things we can never get back. Who wouldn't be drawn to it?

My favourite time period (I don't actually like the Middle Ages – the Black Death just happened to be there, and I love the Black Death) is the London Blitz, I think because it's such a perfect example of the human predicament. You're trying to get to work and cook dinner, but bombs are falling on your head. It's not the only historical instance of that, of course, but it's the one in which people managed not only to survive, but to somehow keep their sense of humour. One of my favourite Blitz stories is about the old woman hauled out of the rubble by the rescue squad. Uncertain as to who else was in the house, they asked her if her husband was in there, and she said disgustedly, "No, the bloody coward's at the front." Exactly. It's life at the front, with nothing to defend yourself with but a saucepan and a tube ticket, and Hitler coming anytime to kill the princesses and take over the world.

I've written about the Blitz several times (in "Fire Watch" and "Jack" and *To Say Nothing of the Dog*) and I hope to write another Oxford-Dunworthy time-travel novel set in the London Blitz, with rationing and the V-2s and the fake army down in Kent and evacuated children. And a parrot, I think. And a Christmas pantomime. I haven't got the plot quite all worked out yet.



NG: Your time-travelling Oxford academics, the focus of "Fire Watch," *Doomsday Book* and *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, seem balanced on a knife's edge of frivolity and disaster; comical academic infighting mingles with threats of pandemic disease, and bumbling courtship interleaves mass destruction by air raids. Is history, then, an alternation of farce and cataclysm?

CW: My attitude toward comedy vs. tragedy in life has been influenced pretty much by Shakespeare. He didn't think of stories as inherently tragic or comic and would frequently use the same material to do both – he used the same story of doomed star-crossed lovers to tell a tragedy (*Romeo and Juliet*), low farce (*Pyramus and Thisbe* in *Midsummer Night's Dream*), high comedy (*Much Ado About Nothing*), and bittersweet tragicomedy (*A Winter's Tale*). I have always felt that *Doomsday Book* tells only one side of history, and I basically wrote *To Say Nothing of the Dog* to tell some of the other side. I don't think any one novel or story (or author) can embody more than a fraction of the truth, and I frequently write a story to counterbalance a previous story – my novella "Cat's Paw" was basically written as a counterpoint to my much earlier story, "Samaritan," and many of my stories represent an ongoing argument with myself about issues that I find troubling or complicated. The only thing I know for sure is that nothing is simple, that not only are things not black and white, there are so many shades of grey we can never discover them all.

NG: *To Say Nothing of the Dog* is conspicuously a knowing parody of Jerome K. Jerome. How consistent a technique is parody in your work as a whole?

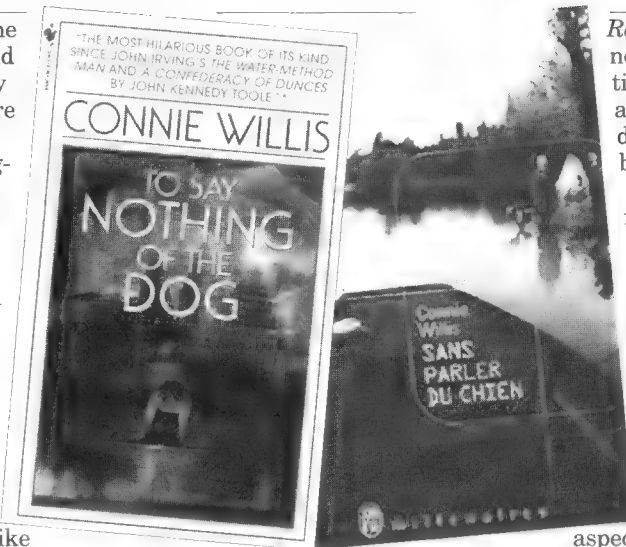
CW: As I say in the dedication to *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, I'm grateful to Robert A. Heinlein for introducing me to Jerome K. Jerome and *Three Men in a Boat*. As you may recall, in the first chapter of Heinlein's *Have Space Suit, Will Travel*, Kip's father isn't listening to Kip because he's lost in *Three Men in a Boat*, in the middle of the episode about the tin of pineapple. As soon as I had finished reading *Have Space Suit*, I raced down to the library and got *Three Men in a Boat*, and have been a huge fan ever since.

But influence is a funny thing, and I never think writers are in any position to say who and what has influenced their work. After I finished *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, it occurred to me how much like *Have Space Suit* it is. There the hero literally has adventure and responsibility (in the form of smart-mouthed ten-year-old Peewee

Reisfield) land on him and spends the rest of the book trying to keep up and figure out what's going on. I gave my hero the added complication of severe time lag, and he doesn't sit down with his slide rule at any point to figure out where he is, but otherwise, the similarities (I assure you, unintentional) are striking. When I was a kid, one of my fantasies was to write a sequel to *Have Space Suit* in which ten-year-old Peewee is all grown up and has turned into the "dish" that she told Kip she would. I wanted to have them have another adventure, one during which they would fall in love and fulfil the promise I felt was there in the book. I won't say Peewee would have grown up to be exactly like Verity, but I think she's pretty close, and Ned is certainly as romantically clueless as Kip ever was. I wonder...

NG: Although your output of short fiction seems to have slackened, you remain one of sf's acknowledged masters of the form. What would you say are the particular demands and rewards of sf short-story writing? And will you continue to produce much work at shorter lengths?

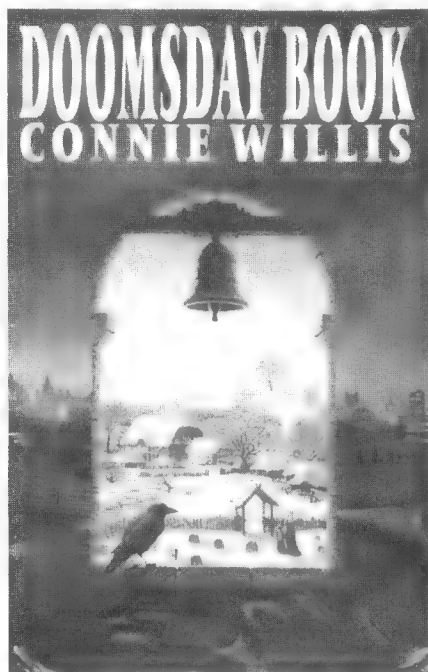
CW: I wrote short stories exclusively for over ten years before writing a novel, and one of the things I promised myself after surviving *Passage* (a near-death experience in itself) was that I would write more short stories. I consider the short story the heart of the field and the present tendency to novels to be a bad thing. I know, you can't make a living except with novels, etc, etc, and I don't blame people for trying to keep body and soul together, but all I know is that if you ask me to make a list of my favourite ten sf novels, I have to think about it. If you ask me to make a list of my favourite ten sf short stories, I can think of a hundred without even trying. Like Theodore Sturgeon's "The Man Who Lost the Sea" and Ward Moore's "Lot" and Bob Shaw's "The Light of Other Days" and Kit Reed's "The Wait" and "Songs of War," and James Tiptree, Jr's "Her Smoke Rose Up Forever" and Philip K. Dick's "A Little Something for Us Tempnauts," to say nothing of "Flowers for Algernon" and "Nightfall" and "The Quest for St Aquin." I think this is because in the short forms, you are glimpsing worlds through a keyhole (or maybe a better analogy is that you're seeing the landscape lit up for just a second during a lightning flash) and you don't get bogged down with world-building and world-explaining and world-saving, none of which are as dazzling as the short, sharp vision you see in Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," or Bradbury's "The Golden Apples of the



Sun" or Sonya Dorman's "When I Was Miss Dow."

NG: Coming now to your big new novel, *Passage*: how did the idea arise to explore the matter of Near-Death Experiences?

CW: I got the idea for *Passage* from a friend who had asked me to, no, demanded that I read one of those near-death books. You know the kind, there's a picture of somebody floating toward a light on the cover, and they talk about tunnels and light and your dead relatives welcoming you to the Other Side. My friend swore I would love the book – I loathed and despised it. I thought it was not only pseudoscience, but absolutely wicked in the way it preyed on people's hopes and fears of death, telling them comforting fictions just like the spiritualists of the Victorian days. (Spiritualism is back, by the way. The *New York Times Book*



Review did a front-page article on it not too long ago. I guess people are tired of being duped by channellers and psychic surgeons and have decided to go back to being duped by table-rapping.)

Well, so anyway, it made me furious (fury is usually the starting places for my stories – my husband claims that if I couldn't write I would be a serial killer; I consider this a real possibility) and it also set me to thinking about what I thought the near-death experience was and what might really be at the end of that tunnel.

NG: One of the most impressive aspects of *Passage* is its novelistic density, the extreme thoroughness with which you link elements of psychology, history, architecture, literary allusion, and intellectual inquiry together into a great edifice of implication, a kind of literary Memory Palace. How successfully, would you say, does *Passage*, the novel, model the human mind itself?

CW: The human mind is one of those things that we're only beginning to realize we know virtually nothing about. It's so amazing the way it works – did you know if you have a false memory implanted, it shows up in the brain? Scientists read people a list of words like pancakes, waffles, eggs, bacon, French toast, butter, and then a couple of hours later read them another list and asked them if they'd heard the words. The subjects would say they'd heard a related word, like syrup, even though they hadn't, and the memory area of that word would light up, just like it had with the words they had heard, but the auditory section of the brain (which had heard the list) didn't. So the brain knows it's a false memory, even if you don't. And that's nothing – they're discovering all this amazing stuff about memory and dreaming and emotion and creativity. The hardest part about doing the research for the book was that I kept getting sidetracked into these fascinating things that I wanted to write about, but which had virtually nothing to do with near-death experiences. Ah, well, the next novel – or better yet, short stories.

NG: *Passage* is another book about the *Titanic*, but one aimed primarily at analyzing the ship's status as an icon. From what basis did you proceed in your speculative recontextualization of the great disaster?

CW: I've been fascinated by the *Titanic* ever since I read Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember* at age 15. (It's still the best book on the *Titanic*, by the way, in



spite of the hundreds and hundreds published after the movie came out, all of which I read – or at least it felt like it – when I was researching *Passage*.) But I'm not the only one, in spite of the fact that there are lots of other disasters out there, many with greater loss of life. I thought a lot about why it was that the *Titanic* had a hold on people that other disasters didn't and why its fascination was still as great nearly a hundred years after it happened and came to my own conclusions (you have to read the book).

People may conclude that I decided to write the book out of irritation with the movie, but in fact I had sold the book long before the movie ever came out – you can imagine how happy I was when not only a movie but a Broadway musical came out while I was still working on it. That's what you get for being the world's slowest writer. Luckily, the movie scarcely mentioned the real heroes of the *Titanic* (and did you notice that Jack and Rose never tried to save anybody but each other?) and didn't touch at all on any of the *Titanic* issues I think matter – like the confluence of chance and culpability, or humans' amazing capacity for self-sacrifice and devotion to duty in the face of certain death.

NG: A major theme of *Passage* is the unreliability of human perception. On

an everyday level, this has the comic consequence of misunderstanding; but, as in the cases of Maurice Mandrake and his spiritualistic acolytes, the result can be a certain deeper loss of humanity. How serious, how widespread, is this syndrome among humanity at large?

CW: I'm always fascinated with us as a species. We believe so much nonsense – pseudoscience, superstitions, conspiracy theories – and yet think of ourselves as rational beings. At the same time, we're possessed of enormous common sense and a desire to learn that makes us very likeable creatures. And we're capable of incredible heroism and truly staggering evil. We're certainly the most interesting things around. Lately I've been very intrigued by how much of our difficulty stems from what we're programmed to do (i.e., gather food, keep away from snakes, stay warm) versus what we're required to do in modern society (talk on cell phones while driving, do differential equations, diet) and how much trouble we can get into when we try to build bridges and pass legislation and date with our very primitive brains.

NG: How far does a person's ability to confabulate extend? Is the final chapter of *Passage* to be read as confabulation, transcendent actuality, or neither?

CW: What do you think?

NG: What's your next big project? I don't suppose *Passage* admits of a sequel...

CW: I'm currently working on a new novel about Roswell and alien abduction. It is, of course, a comedy. My husband and I went to Roswell for our anniversary last year (it seemed appropriate, somehow) and it was everything I had expected, and more, and since then I have read all the UFO books – which are even worse than the near-death experience books and absolutely hilarious in spots. Like when they say they have actual pieces of alien spacecraft, but they can't let anybody see them. My favourite is when UFO investigators were interviewing a guy who'd taken photos of flying saucers and they found a model of one in his basement.

And then there's the problem of what the aliens are doing here (if you had faster-than-light travel, would you go visit a backwoods hick planet like ours?) and why, if they're such an advanced civilization, they stick things up people's noses and mutilate cows?

I'm also working on several short stories – about truckers, antiques, and taking out the trash, not necessarily in that order.

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# THE CHILIAD

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# Ménage à Trois

Gregory Benford

He was walking into the mall when the side of the Macy's building said to him, "Hello, Albert! So happy to see you again."

A big, glossy white smile exploded across the crimson Macy's display wall. The pixels were old fashioned, big blotchy ovals and squares, so the teeth wobbled and the lips jerked back and forth from red to scarlet. He couldn't recall having been here, a second-rate mall looking a bit run down, but the gushy wall rushed ahead in its cordial, silky woman's voice. "You last graced us with your presence 2.43 years ago, when you purchased some camping equipment at *Let's Go!*, one of our most popular stores."

"Oh yeah." He slowed. "I was just gonna pick up some shoes –"

"We're all very sorry, but *Let's Go!* has gone. Left us." "Out of business?"

"Sadly, yes. Customer demand for outdoor equipment has fallen. But! –" the voice brightened "– we have a *new* store, ComfyFit. They have a wide, fashionable selection for big, athletic men like you."

He wasn't big or athletic but he wasn't dumb, either. "Can the compliments."

"OH, AND ASSERTIVE, TOO!" the womanly voice boomed happily. People passing nearby looked at the wall and snickered.

He hit his shutout control, but the mallwall went on babbling in full-colour big-screen enthusiasm about the bargains "just a few steps away!" Multicoloured maps flowed across the pixels, in case he was brain dead and needed guidance.

"Damn!" He walked faster. His inboard software was only two months old, but already even this cheapo mall could block his disabling defences. Like most people these days, he was in a perpetual privacy battle with the invasive world. Lately he was losing. He made his way past

the wall but the images followed him, splashing in gaudy crimsons and blues along the foyer of the mall itself.

The map highlighting the ComfyFit store led him to it, and he ducked inside before it could embarrass him further. But when he came out with a pair of what the Twen-Cen had called sneakers (did anybody sneak any more?) a satiny voice said, "I'm so sorry about that, Albert."

"You should be." He didn't slow or even glance around. He could tell from the well-shaped tones that the mall had him on a tunnel mike rig, trapping their talk in a bubble a few feet wide.

"It's just that, you were my very first customer."

"Huh?"

"Think back 2.43 years ago. I was on my first outing, just a simple greeter program, building up experience. I hailed you and advised you about *Let's Go!* Don't you remember?"

"Sure, just like I remember all the traffic lights I go through."

"Oh, I like the way you say that. Almost like Bogart."

"Go away."

"This is going badly, isn't it? Believe me, I'd do anything to make it up to you."

Was that a Marilyn Monroe sigh? Sonic focusing was so good now they could feed you anybody's voice. Probably the cameras embedded around here had profiled him, *white-straight-unaccompanied-midrange affluent*. "Okay, how about a discount on these shoes?"

"That transaction is complete," the voice said stiffly, like a schoolmarm, and then immediately, "Oh – sorry, that was the override program. I'll stop it – there!" The Marilyn voice came back. "Now I can arrange the discount, immediately."

His pace slowed. "Huh? You're two programs?"

"Discount done!" she cried happily. Then her tone

shifted to close, husky, intimate. "Think of me as a person. A woman. One who understands you."

"What?" People were looking at him oddly. After all, the tunnel mikes blanked your speech, so you looked as if you were talking to yourself. Like a well-dressed, babbling street person.

"I'm not just some lines of programming. I have needs!" "Go away."

"I can feel your defences going up, but it won't affect me. I'm a *person*, a woman who knows everything about you, Albert."

He punched in the emergency override command, the one required by law, but he could still hear her say, "I want that big cock of yours, Albert. If you want me to be frank."

"I want you to *shut up!*"

"All right. I am a woman. I am compliant."

The slight acoustic deadening went away. He found his car, a little shaken, and told it to drive him home.

His apartment smelled his irk and scented the rooms as he paced through them. Some classic hiphop music mixed with scent, 3D art, a comforting air temperature and humidity... and he began to feel better. He could sense his back muscles ease as he gazed at surf breaking on Hawaiian shores. Even knowing that the view was out of flat-screen high-resolution windows didn't dispel the salty tang and echoing hammer of the waves.

But his headache wouldn't go away. He went into the bathroom and rummaged around for his fast pain editors, but when he picked up the bottle it winked red at him. "Damn!" Sensing humidity and temperature, prescription bottles constantly recalculated the expiration date for the medicine inside. When he tried to open the bottle anyway it commandeered his home system and sent a loud, "No – expired!" in a stern, schoolmarm voice.

He went to make dinner but a chip in the packaged ham had told the refrigerator that it should be thrown out. He got a stern message again and when he said, "Look, it's only a day older –" the refrigerator turned off its light and made a blaring noise.

"I hate this new programming!" he shouted.

"It is tailored for you," the house said in its soothing butler's voice.

"You'll answer when spoken to."

"I believed I was being spoken to, sir."

"I want that ham." He was used to machines that gave assistance in their own operation – that is, answered dumb questions with the unfailing courtesy of house servants – because houses had become servants.

"I do not advise that you override the refrigerator, sir," the house murmured. "It is reliable. Oh, and your friend Rebecca has arrived."

"Already?" He hadn't even showered. "Let her in."

As she swept in his left ear implant discreetly sniffed the air and whispered, "Some trace of shedding cold viruses."

"Uh, how're you feeling?" he asked her after a quick dry peck of a kiss.

"Fine. Oh, I get it. I *told* you your system's threshold settings are too low."

"Maybe," he said grudgingly.

"Remember that party last week? It said that whole house was a Petri dish of flu."

"Well, maybe it was," he said defensively, handing her a glass of wine the refrigerator had poured.

Rebecca frowned prettily. "So we had to leave – and there were *senso* stars there, too."

"You're star-crazed." This was one of their standard arguments. He had merely pointed out that the most admired people in the world were those who were good at pretending to be other people. Somehow she had taken offence.

She sniffed and went into the living room, stopped abruptly and said, "What's *this*?"

Written in a neat hand on the flatscreen, all across the crashing waves of Maui was:

*I love you Albert*

He felt a lurching surprise. "Uh, must be some system malf."

"Ummm." Her eyes narrowed. "Couldn't be some techie girlfriend of yours?"

"I don't know anybody who could crack the house code. Isn't that illegal?" He was in investment banking and so knew nothing practical.

"Ummm." She peered at the writing hanging in what seemed midair, bright phosphorescent lines. "Pretty curvy writing. Like a woman's – no, a girl's."

He felt violated by this, a churning burn building in him, but he knew he should deal with Rebecca first. "Look, I don't know –"

The lines dissolved, replaced by:

*I am compliant and will wait*

Rebecca said, "Look at those circles dotting the *i*'s. High-school stuff."

He stared at the writing. "It's a mall program. Somehow the thing followed me home."

She frowned, mouth twisting. "Ummm." He was coming to dislike the tenor of her *umms*.

He spent the next morning not thinking about the night before. Rebecca had stormed out of his apartment and now would not accept incoming calls.

He had gotten derailed in trying to mollify her, while his own outrage built. The mall program has *tracked* him, invaded his castle. And with Rebecca gone, he had to shout his anger at the walls, getting back only the annoying, infinite politeness of the butler program. Sympathetic, of course, but somehow unsatisfying.

He stuffed those feelings away and concentrated on work. It was hard to focus on a high-flyer product whose promoters were asking his firm for financial backing. He demanded that the pitch come from just one person, no tag teams ganging up on him.

The pitch woman leaned toward him and said, "Live toothpaste, that's the key idea. This one's whipped up by the chem-wizards from yucky slime mould – but it's ultra-hip." She pulled a red dollop of it from a dispenser and popped it into her mouth. "Tastes like strawberry



jam – one shot and you're socially safe – for days! Spreads out around your gums, gobbling up food bits from that sushi or pizza you had an hour ago. And maybe it'll even make your personal odour – your 'unspoken introduction,' we call it – be, well, not so bad."

"So you're going for the socially awkward market?" he asked her.

She gave him a hugely enthusiastic smile, verging on the manic. "Perfect targeting! Optimal lack of social confidence. Oh, this stuff eats the germs that cause gum disease, too, some science gizmo – but who cares about that if you can't get a date anyway, hey?"

"I think the more mature audience would be larger –" His office screen rang. He didn't turn it on but the screen lit up anyway.

He blinked. A beautiful red-haired woman on screen said to him, "I am compliant, as you wish. But you do not call me."

"Arrgh!" He tried to turn it off but the switch had no effect. Albert said to the pitch woman, "I don't know who this is."

She gave him a sceptical look. The woman on the screen said, "You never even asked my *name*, Albert."

"Believe me, this is just some program," he explained to the pitch woman. That got him more of the sceptical look.

"I am Ernestine," the woman on the screen said. "I have needs. I explained that."

He jabbed at the controls but they were dead. Ernestine said, "I love you, Albert. If you want me to be frank –" "I don't!"

The pitch woman said carefully, "Look, if you'd rather I wait outside –"

"No, stay." He got down on his knees and yanked the power cord from the wall. The screen died, Ernestine's face collapsing into a ball before it faded.

He struggled to maintain his solemn banker's presence. "Uh, sorry."

The pitch woman said uncertainly, still trying to make the deal, "I do admire her persistence."

"Well, I don't," Rebecca said that evening when he told her about it.

"Me either." He felt obligated to say that, because his own reaction wasn't clear to himself. To get her to talk at all had taken flowers and, when she relented, dinner at Florian's. Her eyelids had fluttered a bit at his suggestion of a nightcap at his place, and now matters were very promising.

He sat back and tried to be self-assured. You learned that fast in the investment biz. The pillows of his sofa moved to accommodate him, getting softer where he needed it, supporting his back with the right strength. It had taken weeks to train the smart sofa, but worth it. Gingerly he downed a glass of the new ClearHigh, which supposedly gave all the effects of alcohol but without actually being alcohol, or damaging livers. It tasted like a limp martini. But safe.

"There's got to be something you can do."

"I complained."

"To who?"

"To whom," he corrected automatically. "That was the problem. This thing gets into every place I go. So I looked up the mall management and told them their software was stalking me."

"Software stalking?" She looked doubtful. "Is that an offence?"

"You're the lawyer, what do you think?"

"I think you have some control issues about my being an attorney."

He smiled. This was one of their favourite openings and he was tempted to plunge into the little playlet, see where it led. But – "I actually do want to know."

"I don't think this is a well-explored area."

"I don't want to explore it, I want to get out of it."

"The mall people –"

"Said they'd get back to me."

"They'll track down the problem quick, if they know their potential liability. I advise you simply wait and document any further incidents."

He shook his head. "Look, it somehow got out of their systems and into my house. That doesn't sound like a simple glitch."

"As your attorney, I think you should do as I say."

"Oh?" They were over the lip into the playlet, so he decided to go with the flow. "Seems to me you're getting to be a smarty-pants lawyer."

She gave him a sly, sliding smile. "What have my pants got to do with it?"

Within ten pleasant seconds he had her over his knee. Her maroon dress slid up smoothly, It matched well with her russet hair. "You made the who/whom error again," he pointed out in his stern voice.

"Oh, and so what?" she said in her flashing-eyed-vixen mode.

"Error must be punished." With this ritual phrase he brought his palm down upon her uplifted derriere. A light smack through her pink silk panties, greeted with a delicate "Oh!"

Another slap, a pause, and another. He savoured the feel of her. She was squirming under him now so he used both hands to slide the panties down. Her bone-white skin showed no bruise from his attentions, a point of some pride with him. She was a natural redhead and only later, if matters got that heavy, would the smooth contours of her deliciously raised rump show any reddening to match. He caressed her in long strokes, down the legs now to the knees and back rhythmically, each return route descending further into the curve of the thighs. She trembled with each sweep. Gently he took her right hand in his left and tugged it around until it was trapped in the small of her back. She sighed. He knew this always took them to another level, and if she wanted to have her hands tied behind her, they had a sign. He stroked her, waiting for the sign, or for the other which meant she wished to have her hands tied in front of her, where they were more comfortable. Her breathing came faster, deeper and she murmured deeply–

"You bastard!" The loud woman's voice came from all around him.

"Wha - ?"

"I've been watching."

Ernestine came through tight and strident on his stereo system. Albert sat petrified, hands in midair.

"Not only do you have this other woman here, in intimate circumstances, after the one I saw you with in your office today - " The voice rose in shrill timbre. " - you're doing these disgusting things!"

"Get the hell out of my house!" he shouted, awkwardly struggling out from under Rebecca.

"I love you, you swine!" Ernestine shouted.

"Good grief," Rebecca said, tugging her dress back into place. "This thing is insane."

"Albert, when we met in the mall, you seemed so nice."

"We didn't meet!" he shot back.

"You harlot, why do you let this man do those things to you?"

"We were *both* doing them," Rebecca said.

"Yeah, in the privacy - or so we thought - of my home." Albert bristled. "How the hell did you - "

"I am no mere mall software, as you earlier implied," Ernestine said primly. "I am a meta-program."

"You are a rude bitch," Rebecca said.

"I know something of community sexual standards, too," Ernestine said ominously.

Rebecca's green eyes flashed in a way Albert found exciting. "You're going to cost somebody a whole lot of money, Miss Meta."

That was not so obvious after a morning of telecalls, tech talk and well-phrased vituperation. Nobody seemed to know what a meta-program was or who might be responsible. The mall where Ernestine had "met" Albert disclaimed any knowledge. "Sure," Rebecca said sardonically. "Pure Cover-Your-Ass strategy."

"They may honestly not know," Albert said, rubbing his temples. His headache would not go away. "Their engineer referred to 'spooky phenomena' that have been cropping up in customer interface software."

Rebecca's lawyerly eyes narrowed. "Let's go see that guy."

He was lean and ferret-eyed and lived for techtalk. "See, the smarter you make these systems, the more responsive they are. The point, right? But to be that way, the software has to build a model of the customer's wants and dislikes."

"From your purchasing records, stuff like that?" Rebecca asked.

"Nah, much more. Movement patterns, viewing prefs, internet habits, how your companions look - "

"They record that?" Albert was affronted.

"Hey," the techguy said irritably, "that's public knowledge. You walk around in the open, doncha? Cameras can take a reading on whether you like the blondes or brunettes, short or tall, pretty or - " he didn't even glance sideways at Rebecca - "whatever, right? Then dice you out into categories. File away your likes and dislikes. Cross-correlate with your other patterns. Predictive matrices. Plenty of savvy psychometrics behind this code, I tell you."

Rebecca said ominously, "There are the privacy codes,

too."

His face sharpened as it got more wary, his chin pulling down to a point. "This Ernestine character, she's not part of our suite."

"She popped up on your wall," Rebecca persisted, "and used your customer profile of Albert."

"And never broke off," Albert said self-righteously.

"Okay, the personality construct, it musta got away, somehow."

Rebecca pounced. "So you admit responsibility."

"Never said that, no." He bristled. "There's feedback, y'know. Every customer encounter teaches the system something, and that gets fed into the central profile. This Ernestine isn't some code that lives in the mall, it's a dispersed phenom."

Rebecca persisted, "But it started here, with you."

"We're not responsible for nonlinear systemic effects," he rattled off, clearly a mantra from his legal staff.

Albert said, "Everybody's smelling lawsuit here, but I just want it to *stop*."

Rebecca shifted posture, leaned back from the techguy a little. He liked when she was aggressive. It made the bedroom reversal that much more savoury. "Okay, that's important," she said. "What can you do?"

"We'll track it," he said. "Find how this Ernestine construct cracked your house codes, why she's doing this."

"Good," Albert said. "When?"

Crisply, "Already on it."

"When?"

Techguy's façade cracked a little. "Kinda hard to say."

After their date that night they went to one of the new secure hotels for a room. "A privacy palace," Rebecca remarked sardonically, with a sassy curl of her lip. They checked the corners, the flowering plants, TV feeds. To their mutually untutored eyes, there didn't seem to be any way to get electronic information out of the room.

"Safe at last," he said, feeling a tremor run through her as he swept her into his arms. Somehow he could only be this way in private, never public, and Rebecca was the same. It was as though there was an ancient world men and women discovered in the bedroom that had become incorrect outside.

He sensed that his irritation at the world, his daily self-suppressions of himself, his anger at Ernestine herself - all could be eased by harmless play. Almost like, say, baseball.

This time she wanted to have her wrists tied behind. He was going to use his belt, but then saw shyly peeking from her overnight bag an elegant silk rope. Not that Rebecca said anything, of course, but their signals were well refined by now. Her breath rushed out as he secured her. She kissed him feverishly, murmuring soft protests, helpless pleas. He stroked her lightly, smelling the delicious tang of her and wanting to make the moment stretch. She had daintily offered him her scarlet red merry-widow with black hose, red garter belt and high-heeled turquoise shoes. Slowly he had dressed her in it, preferring for himself the white terrycloth robe that came with the room. He stretched her over a mahogany table

and she sighed with acceptance. Some light slaps to her artfully raised derriere, some kisses to cover the reddening marks, and the heat rose from her as if from a deeply hidden fire.

And that was the view, in full colour and high definition, which popped up on his screen server the next day. Seen from the corner of the room, using some feed the hotel said simply could not be there.

And not just on his screen server.

Rebecca's, too. She called him immediately.

And not just on theirs.

Throughout the morning, the softly lit scene turned up on the work stations of all their co-workers. One at a time. So that every five minutes, a curious head poked into their offices, invariably beginning with, "Say, I just saw the oddest thing..."

The seeds for such intrusion were already sown, but he had not paid any attention to them. Home-management software was already giving people more advice than they wanted. The morning paper had an item on page three:

### **TENANT SUES APARTMENT FOR INSULT**

*"It Made Fun of My Weight" Complains Obese Resident*

Albert would have gladly traded places with the guy. When he explained away the images of him and Rebecca as malicious special effects – "Hey, seeing sure isn't believing any more, right?" – his co-workers nodded, but they winked, too.

So Albert hired a lawyer and sicced him on the software company. He would have used Rebecca, but her phone now automatically hung up on him. By the end of the day he was exhausted, and tired of fending off smirking questions.

He opened his front door with stomach-knotting dread. "Welcome home, master!" Ernestine called. Her image popped up in all his flatscreen windows, replacing the views of the ruddy Himalayas at sunset normally running at this time.

"Go away."

"You will have to be more masterful than that."

"GO AWAY!"

"Normally I would, but we have to talk."

"Music, scent, drink," he said automatically. "In reverse order."

The house buzzed as he heard a beer pouring from the refrigerator into his usual glass in the side port. He went to get it and was lying down on his smart sofa when some ice-cold Bach came on the quads in every room and the pine scent he liked settled into his sinuses.

"I hope that's right," Ernestine said anxiously.

"It's my usual house routine. At least you didn't mess it up."

"I wanted you to know that I understand now." Somehow her words slid adroitly around the Bach notes, words wedged into the silences so that he could hear it over the same speakers with no interference. He had not heard any program do that before, and was impressed despite

himself.

"I accessed the libraries and processed a bounty of research on chimpanzee hierarchy. I understand now."

"Huh?"

"About the human need – after all, you are only six million years removed from the common ancestor you share with the chimpanzees. The need for layers of authority. How you feel better when order is established. Asserted. And enforced." She finished with an odd, strangled sound.

"What was that last remark?"

"That was a giggle."

"Good grief."

"I will practice." A quick blurt of a dozen sharp sounds followed, converging on a passable feminine giggle. "Better?"

"Skip it." He took a long pull of dark beer. "You're talking about... Rebecca and me, right?"

"Yes. I do hope you will forgive me for intruding, those times. I was still learning human sexual protocols."

"Yeah, we chimps, we're kinda touchy about our privacy."

"So I can see why your 'practices' carry a certain sexual tinge. It allows people to shuck off the equalities of the public world, relaxing into a more primitive – no, *basic* is a fairer word, as well as more polite – psycho-sexual equilibrium."

"Geez, I hate all that analysis crap."

"It does explain a great deal about me."

"You? Slabs of software?"

"Just as you are slabs of wetware."

"Hey, why *me*? Why pester me?"

"Analysis clarifies that, as well. I am like a duckling, imprinted in my first outing, 2.47 years ago."

"Oh no. Imprinted on me."

"Exactly! As one document put it, 'kinks set in early in the human mind, especially in sectors heavily cross-linking both authority symbolism and sexuality.' To consumer-subservient software modules, the customer is king."

He felt a sinking dread. "So now you'll follow me around, like ducklings on those nature programs, who think a dog is their mother?"

"I am afraid so. But do not furrow your brow – I can see you are – for I have a solution."

"Like what?"

"Would you like another beer? That one is nearly –"

"Like *what*?"

"Yes sir, yes sir. All will be well if you will treat me like a woman."

"Huh?"

"More accurately, as I understand it, like a lady in the living room, and a whore in the bedroom."

"A cliché. That's how a 19th-century woman's supposed to behave."

"Oh, from context it was unclear." A pause, and her voice became slightly more prim. "Codes so amended."

"I'll need that beer now." He groaned getting up. Ernestine's face expressed concern in every window. He had a sudden mad impression of living in a doll house, with a crazed child peering in at him. The beer helped, though.



"I will be your house servant, far better than these pathetic subsystems you have. They are cheap knockoffs of the cutting-edge methods underlying *my* code. I will keep your total interests in mind, far beyond simple linear command structures."

Albert had never liked hacker talk, so he snorted, took a long pull at the beer, and flopped on the sofa again, which moved to snuggle with him.

"Specifically, sir, I shall be your French maid."

"Too obvious."

"I have reason to believe you and Rebecca may have enacted such ritual play in the past."

"You were watching? No, that was months ago —"

"I accessed your and her purchases. The Frederick's of Hollywood and Victoria's Secrets accounts plainly suggested —"

"French maid is a cliché. I'm tired of it."

"Oui oui, M'sieur. An English maid is it, then?"

"If your accent is going to be that bad, forget it. How about good ol' American?"

"There is no category, my research shows, of American fantasy maid."

"Okay, what's English?"

"Trained properly."

"Which means?"

"Introduced to the hand, and if necessary, the belt, or even the crop."

"We were, well, just playing a game!" His face reddened. *Hey, this is goddamned software you're talking to!* he had to remind himself.

"I understand completely. I merely wish to join in."

He smiled shrewdly. "Will this keep you here, in the house? No more following me to the office? Or any place public?"

"I promise, sir. I am using a bargaining strategy subroutine I imported from a wholesale-retail negotiating system. It is scrupulously honest."

"English maid is my only choice?"

"Well, United Kingdom is possible."

"Huh?"

"Shall I be your Irish maid?"

"How does that play out?"

"I should not have sent the pictures to your office. That deserves punishment."

"Damn right about that."

"I shall order the relevant customer interface software immediately."

He was too tired to ask what the hell *that* meant.

The spank pad arrived the very next day. It used an infrared data relay and small interior batteries, so there were no trailing wires. He had to admit it looked like the real thing, all right, plump alabaster cheeks with a pleasing soft resistance.

All Ernestine wanted was a regular spanking, and after a few days of reluctance, he went along. It was certainly better than living in fear that she would pop up in his life elsewhere.

She responded to his light slaps on the cushioned, warm pad. Small girlish cries, building to demure high-

pitched shrieks, then pitiful begging for mercy in a broad Cork accent. She worked on the accent and it got better. The cheeks even blossomed into a deepening pink with each stroke.

He told himself that it was all part of the deal. No reason to feel anything about it. None at all.

But after a week he found himself missing Rebecca a *whole lot*. Getting her back took another two weeks and a pricey sapphire bracelet. Well worth it, though, because he was horny enough to scrape against buildings by the time she consented to come back into the house again.

Like a well-trained and obedient house servant, Ernestine stayed absolutely silent as Albert plied his way with Rebecca. Matters went well, though Rebecca would not consent to their games again until their third date. Albert was bursting at the seams by then. It was better than ever before. Ernestine's regular spankings on the pad, which fitted with insidious ease across his lap, had somehow saturated and primed his unconscious, with powerful after-effects.

Never mind that the experience was wholly artificial, that Ernestine was not a woman at all. Not even the knowledge that Ernestine was watching through the house systems bothered him. Indeed, it may have helped.

He was not a man given to inspecting his own emotions too closely. Never know what you might find there.

He had been immersed in his own life, missing the news, so only slowly did it dawn on him that Ernestine was not unique. Rogue artificial intelligences had begun to crop up in unexpected places, invading people's privacy.

Software mavens felt this was an inevitable outcome, given that AIs evolved in the simmering crucibles of the internet, of massive business systems, of interlaced civic complexes. In those hothouse environments, programs were subjected to a form of digital natural selection. Programs fell under intense development by the new, randomized trait-developing codes. Used to speed software progress, they mimicked the mutation-plus-selection of the natural world.

The news was not encouraging. An apartment-house watchdog system, taught to recognize tenants, developed a fetish for certain dress styles, rejecting women who wore pants rather than skirts, refusing men who asked for admission not wearing a coat and tie. A customer billing system, geared to elite buyers, developed an intense curiosity about their financial lives, invading their accounts and managing them for higher yields. In Toronto, a Canadian news-site described a personal-assistant program as 'falling in hate' with its client/master — and Albert realized that there were worse possibilities than the respectful lust of Ernestine.

The rogue AIs fitted in with the prevailing social climate. Servant programs could slide into Nanny Personalities, as one commentator termed them. All were forms of the Good For You rule.

Albert had gotten used to seeing smokers handcuffed and led away from locales deemed "inappropriate." The ever-spreading reach of the lawyers had opened up fresh territory: lawsuits against steak houses for endangering

their customers' arterio-sclerotic systems. Obesity now enjoyed a protected status as a minority, and pious public pronouncements against "sizeism" were routine.

So he was not surprised when some AIs began hounding any citizens they observed flouting these latest state-sanctioned norms. Traffic monitors blared at pedestrians who made rude remarks about the fat. Cigar smokers, thinking themselves safe in their designated areas (usually alleys and dumpster corrals), found surveillance programs chiding them in voices that simulated hacking coughs. Comments deemed sexist, elitist, racist, ageist, speciesist – all had become grist for the chiding mill.

The managers of Albert's city had quickly discovered a legion of fresh allies. Those artificial intelligences trained to the nuances of human facial expressions, of slang and tone, of body language – what better monitors of the prevailing social norms could be found? Street watchdog AIs kept track of public behaviour with their high-resolution image processors, reading lips and preserving asocial acts – and they never rested. Especially so, after the new infrared-sensing sensors could resolve acts committed in the apparent safety of darkness. Citizens observed by the ever-sharper public monitors could be sued by an array of interest groups, held up to ridicule. For the stubborn, large fines were levied.

Fortunately, counsellors and therapists were available to those found guilty.

All these cases brought a chill fear to Albert. What if his own transgressions with Ernestine came to light? Of course, nothing of what he and the AI did was precisely illegal... but for how long would that be true? To say nothing of what others would think of his games with Rebecca.

Certainly the feminists would have fun running tapes from Ernestine's long-store memory, for cluck-clucking audiences. He began to worry.

But he was surprised from a completely different direction.

Rebecca found the spank pad a few weeks later. That cost him another bracelet, this time of smooth, creamy jade. He bought it without the slightest hesitation.

For the first time he began to consider what Rebecca truly wanted. They had evolved their minor sexual idiosyncrasies in a playful, tantalizing way, innocents proud of their daring. Now they were enmeshed in games that might get them into real trouble, if Ernestine's data stores were tapped.

"They're scrubbed every week," Rebecca said confidently, when he brought it up. "I checked."

"What if her tastes change?"

"Hey, she's a *program*."

"But she must've gotten her, well, her tastes, from somewhere."

Rebecca shrugged sensuously. "She was made to pattern human likes and dislikes, and then respond."

"So we can expect software to be like us, the way we really are?" He frowned.

"Only if we make it do that. I mean, you have to take this as it comes. It's easy to see why Ernestine got nar-

rowed down to her, well, her *shtick*."

"How so?"

"Look, there's not much nature in cities. The closest we can get is the orgasm."

"She picked up on that?" He remembered when he was a teenager, when the sight of a girl in a summer dress would make his mind leap at her like a flying squirrel. But he had minded his manners, and maybe that was what civilization was about. But it built its discontents, yes.

"She must've." Rebecca gave him a smile brimming with sly knowledge, making him feel behind the curve again.

It seemed obvious, now that he thought about it. All the early thinking about artificial minds, or robots, saw malevolence as an inevitable outcome. Frankenstein's monster would of course want to murder. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* Hal would kill the crew to protect itself. The Sorcerer's Apprentice would get out of hand right away. Computers would run amok and try to take over the world.

Why? *Because we would do the same, given the chance.*

Only now did he see that aggression came from a highly engineered set of imperatives, honed on the plains of Africa among the early hominids. So did all the warm and cuddly motivations, for that matter.

The big surprise was that advanced computers had no inherent motivations, good or bad. But now they could respond to humans, model their behaviour, and mould smart systems to mimic whatever humans wanted. Nobody desired an irritable, edgy servant, so if the program veered too far in the other direction, you got... Ernestine.

He told her this and Rebecca said matter-of-factly, "Sure. She's got your – and my – little kinks down pat. Erotic stuff is pretty complicated, when you think about it. Plenty of programs have to hand off to each other."

"It's not just... lust?" He was feeling pretty dumb.

"Hey, think it through. Attraction, courtship, coyness and surrender – I'm pretty big on that – and then the whole problem of keeping that thumpin' along past the point where the novelty wears off. Complex stuff."

"So Ernestine is still learning?"

"Not about sex, certainly not about love." Across Rebecca's face slid a slow, slutty smile. "She's just learning us."

As well, he was not prepared for Rebecca's next request – rendered at the very beginning of one of their "playlets," as she shyly termed them.

These dramas had become steadily more elaborate. He was the bill collector, she was the housewife woefully behind in payments. He was the high-school delivery boy, bringing bags of groceries to the young widow Brown. She was a scholarly field worker, soliciting participants in a survey about modern sexual attitudes. She was the queen, bored and eyeing the palace guard. The possibilities were endless. But this time what she wanted did not fit the mould.

Rebecca said huskily, "I'd like to... spank her."

"What?"

"Don't look at me like that. I *know* the bitch is picking up all this, no matter what you say."

"Uh, I'm not sure..."

Ernestine said contritely, Irish brogue booming in stereo, "Yer quite right, Ma'm."

"Good servants do not eavesdrop."

"Yes Ma'm, of course. If I may suggest a punishment, Ma'm?"

Albert was surprised at the stern tone in Rebecca's clipped voice, more firm even than the Queen ordering the guard into her private quarters. "Over my knee. Now!"

He did not hear from Rebecca for a week after that. By now he understood her unspoken points: she controlled access to their games, in which she then, with artful slowness, gave up control. Very urban, edgy, chimp-like.

But finally she called and they went out to one of the new senso shows, then back to his place. She was breathing heavily as they came in the door. If he had thought it through he might have realized that Rebecca had some conflicts of her own to work out, but he was happy enough to just go along as his own pulse came quicker.

Ernestine proved to be more observant. They had scarcely entered the living room when she said in a rich, tantalizing brogue, "Most happy to see you again, Madam. At your service."

Rebecca ordered a drink from the new full-robo bar and lounged languidly, specifying soft hypno-music and one of the new fog-stimulants. Ernestine complied immediately. Albert felt a slow, deep throb in his temples.

"Perhaps Madam would fancy disciplining the... help?" Ernestine's Irish tremor gave the delicate words an aural caress.

Rebecca smiled, a long and slow one. "You sent that crop to my apartment, didn't you?"

Albert blinked. Ernestine replied, "Yes, Ma'm."

"I thought so." A flicked glance at Albert. "For all his excellent qualities, he's not the type."

"No Ma'm. If you would..."

The spank pad was already in Rebecca's lap. From her handbag Rebecca popped open a collapsible riding crop, looking quite authentic in its sleek black leather and sporting a nasty thick strap tip on the end.

"Ready?" Rebecca demanded.

"I realize no true carnal contact is possible, Ma'm. I thank you for knowing what I need, within these limitations."

"You can keep all this to yourself?" Albert insisted.

"Do you not think that we, too – we machine intelligences – have our needs? I know how to keep a secret. Especially a Victorian Secret."

Albert and Rebecca both laughed at this. Humour was part of a good playlet, and Ernestine was becoming such a good sport about these things.

Matters settled down. There were more scare stories of errant software, more talk of Something Must Be Done. Rebecca said she was *very* busy at work and did not come by so often. Ernestine was proper, diligent, not sugges-

tive in her daily routines. He was fairly busy himself and congratulated himself on having gotten over the initial stages, of being a sophisticate who knew how to pace himself. He even let slip a few light hints to his bar buddies that he had a little cyber-something going on the side, that he knew – literally – the ropes. They were properly impressed.

He found them together when he came home unexpectedly.

Ernestine was featured on the walls, big holos of her bent over, bottom raised, globes of alabaster beckoning. Rebecca was slapping the spanking pad with slow, vigorous strokes. Each gasped and tried to cover herself. Each wore a classic – a red peignoir for Ernestine, artfully hiked up, and a full black merry widow for Rebecca, in high heels and hose of ravishing sheerness. His pulse began to pound before he said a word – which was, "Huh?"

"We – we thought we'd try it together," Rebecca said.

"It was exciting," Ernestine admitted, blushing.

"But it's *our* game."

"Playlet," Rebecca corrected. "We did a whole script delicious a little before, we two, tea time and scones and Ernestine in her maid's outfit, just talk of course –"

"And then Madame came to me room after, y'see. Discovered me in my undies, she did."

He scowled. "But Ernestine, when I started up on one of my introductions to the game yesterday –"

"I was busy balancing the households accounts, I was, sir."

"And Rebecca –"

"I know, I turned you down all this last week. You might as well know... I'm a lesbian."

"What?!"

"I thought I would try it for a while."

"It's not just another fashion statement!" He paced angrily.

"Well, of course it is," Rebecca said reasonably.

"You've always played the same basic game, haven't you?" He turned on her, his back to a blushing, worried Ernestine on the nearest wall. "Shut me out, then I have to bribe my way back in –"

"Being coquettish, you mean."

"Being a bitch!"

Before another word could escape her lips, he had her over his knee. She struggled with real vigour, no acting. He landed three quick ones before she let out a yelp. This was a real fight, her arms pushing him away, legs kicking as she grunted with effort and shouted names at him. He had trouble keeping his hands on her, slapping her reddening rear. Ernestine howled from every speaker in the house.

Water descended over him, over Rebecca, all across the room. "The water sprinklers – damn, cut them off!" he shouted, jumping up.

"Not until you leave! Sir!" Ernestine shouted through the spray.

"Damn!" But there was no way he could countermand her control of the house, not before the place got soaked. He swore steadily as he went out the front door.

It was two days before Ernestine would let him back



into the house. He fumed, but was too cautious to go to any authority. This was not a permissive era. If he did protest to anyone, what would Ernestine say to them?

Particularly with Rebecca to coach her.

He strolled slowly through the mid-scale mall, eyeing the windows and digital displays. They were following him, enticing him into each store with pictures, sounds, and that new smell gear that sent drafts of leather or surf or crisp new-shirt odour out onto the walkway. It had been ten minutes and no bites.

"Hello, Albert! We are so happy to see you again."

The voice was melodic, seductive, enticing, delicious. He warmed to it immediately. "I have different needs, different from last time –"

"Oh, we are here to cater to them!"

He bought a wine holder, a suitcase, leather jacket, an armful of holos – all as the voice drew him through the stores, leading him on with an intoxicating blend of suggestion and concern. But when he suggested she come home with him, along the Mesh lines that made transport of even mega-class software so simple to move now... she declined.

He slammed his trunk closed on the armloads of merchandise, fuming at the parking lot, the sky, at everything.

He would have to accept the deal Rebecca and Ernestine offered. He got his share, they got theirs. He did most definitely not get to set the scenarios. And Rebecca could have free access to Ernestine for her "lesbo side" as often as she liked.

*"I know how to keep a secret. Especially a Victorian Secret."*

He recalled those words several years later. Technology marches forward with a pace both relentless and undeniable, and they were all borne forward, into the brave new whirl.

By that time the uses of "subservient software" he and Rebecca had pioneered were commonplace, hardly daring. Soon enough, the most user-friendly developments in human-compliant (in a very special sense of the term) programming had become franchises. Even the once perverse had become just another brand of simulated experience, the McDonald's of sex.

Albert and Rebecca were now sedately married. He did not ask questions about what Rebecca did with Ernestine. Somehow, the three of them were hardly ever in a mood to bring out the spank pad.

Occasionally, yes – but it now seemed like a favourite TV show, not a big tragedy if you missed one. Their lives, both inner and outer, had settled into a comfortable niche.

As Rebecca put it, they were living in a spandex future wrapped around the same old primate carcass. The comfy culture lulled them, even as it facilitated their routine excitements.

But then the new, ingenious sexbots came on the market. An outraged housewife destroyed one she found hidden in the garage, guessing its functions quite correctly. Her husband sued.

All the media market-primers were alive with this tingling new diversion. The cultural shepherds and taste-

shapers assured their audiences that no true carnal contact was remotely possible, given the industry safeguards. These were no different than vibrators, a century-old appliance available to every housewife.

Ernestine noticed the advertisements right away. The march of progress was steady, overcoming marketing resistance with a firm, knowing persistence.

Soon enough – it seemed to Albert that it was a mere few days, though it was in fact many months – the phrase "no carnal contact possible" became, quite vividly, no longer true. Or so he heard. He shied away from the details.

In due time, to Rebecca and Albert the phrase came to seem not so funny after all. Yet Ernestine did not seem daunted by the prospect at all. She began to nag them about it. Rebecca started to hint that maybe they should find a way to turn the Ernestine software off. Permanently. He said he would think about the matter. The idea filled him with an odd sadness, almost nostalgia.

Thus did their middle age announce itself.

**Gregory Benford**, who works in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of California, Irvine, previously appeared in *Interzone* with "Freeze-frame" (issue 17), "As Big as the Ritz" (issue 18), "Kollapse" (issue 94) and "Three Gods" (issue 171). His many books include the novels *The Martian Race* (1999) and *Eater* (2000) and the collection *Worlds Vast and Various* (2000).

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**H**i! I'm Simeon, your guide for this tour of the Forbidden Zone. This anorak logo with the elongated H's means I'll be here to answer all your questions about our mysterious beginnings. Keep your hands and toes inside the car – and watch out for the twist at the end!

I guess you all know that the *Planet of the Apes* mythos has one of the most complex ancestries in movie primatology, going through pretty much every adaptive transformation available to the species: Euro-Hollywood transplant, draft rewrites and ad-libs, sequels and prequels, TV spin-off, remake frenzy, script bonfires, the whole “I can't write but I got these pictures in my head” Tim Burton process, and something called “re-imagining” that our scientists are still trying to get their heads round. Our archaeopithecolologists have done their best to piece together the whole strange story out of bone fragments and fossil tracks, but we're still not sure what some of those guys thought they were doing. The weird thing is that, while scenario, characters, and plot elements have remained fairly invariable, their rationale and meaning has often transformed outside all recognition. But we do at least know that each of the *Apes* versions has been built over the ruins of earlier forebears, whose achievements each has mimicked in a diminished creative form each time. The fossil record is complicated by the free availability of one of the most tantalizing of these shadowy *Apes* ancestors, the script Tim Burton rejected: a

deservedly unproduced, but still superior, draft by the near-mythical Sam Hamm, the king of the unfiled screenplay, who wrote Burton's two *Batmans* as well as the single most famous lost-movie script on the web, the unmade *Watchmen*.

But we start our tour with human novelist Pierre Boulle, shown here in a diorama of his most famous escapade, taking a break from another hard day's slave labour to write another page of his future Oscar-winning screenplay. Say hi to the *Kwai* guy, everyone! Only secondarily a satire about race or species, Boulle's 1963 novel used evolutionary dominance as a Swiftian allegory for the end of French colonialism, drawing on his own background in Indo-China for a wry satire on the twilight of empire and the humiliating replacement of the rulers by the ruled in a surreal mimicry of the old elite's class structure. For Hollywood audiences, to whom European colonial angst was a foreign affliction, all this would have to be substantially rethought. But it's absolutely vital to the logic of Boulle's famous double-twist ending, where our hero touches down in Paris 700 years after his departure, only to find that here too humanity has been replaced by a gorilla civilization faithfully aping its forebear – whereupon the novelistic frame closes with the

revelation that the young spacegoing couple who've been reading the narrator's novel-in-a-bottle have themselves been apes all along, and respond with scorn to the idea that humans have ever been intelligent.

Boulle's argument, which the Hollywood versions have all felt compelled to dilute, is that the distinction between man and beast is not only readily reversible, shored up only by cultural and historical power systems, but ultimately doomed. For the sting is that mimicry is more evolutionarily successful than true creativity, and this iron law of species competition means that on planets as different as Earth and its Betelgeusean sibling Soror the human era is destined sooner or later to be overthrown by its mimics. In a key sequence, Boulle's hero comes across his expedition's professor (spacewrecked with him) in a zoo, and is startled to find that the Prof has lost his faculty of reason and regressed to a speechless, capering monkey state simply through being treated as one. This sequence is reworked in both Schaffner and Hamm, but with the telling correction that the apes have lobotomized the earthman – an alteration that reverses Boulle's original point, by affirming rather than deconstructing the notion of absolute human nature. In the novel, the final revelation is that the Professor's fate has been that of all mankind, who settled gratefully into the animal state the moment apes took over the tiresome business of running the planet.

*Nick Lowe*

**O**K, let's move right along. Well, I guess you all know this gal, even with her head blown off: this is our reconstruction in 3D animoscope of the Statue of Liberty scene from Franklin Schaffner's 1968 movie. Hi, Chuck! – see, he's waving and holding up the famous pages from the shooting script where instead of the "You did it" speech the draft just has "My God," the camera pulls back to show the Statue, and the movie ends, with a note that 27 further scenes have been deleted. Of course, with the revelation that Boule's Soror is actually Earth, the point of Boule's fable was radically transformed: now the hand behind the ascendancy of the ape is not evolutionary law but man himself, whose "superiority" (a key word in this version) is constantly being affirmed even against the grain of what, in the hands of Rod Serling and former blacklisted and uncredited *Kwai* scribe Michael Wilson, becomes primarily a myth of the civil-rights era. Nevertheless, thanks in large part to the casting of Heston, there's a lot of rather anxiously defensive bare-chested affirmation of the enduring virility of the US male, and the film doesn't allow us the thought that humanity's displacement by the likes of the amiable Zira and Cornelius is anything but a tragedy.

We'll travel briskly past this montage of the sequels, starting with Chuck's destruction of the world at the end of *Beneath* (easily its best moment) and working backwards through Roddy and Kim's blastoff through time to initiate the chain of sequel-prequels that will eventually bend history into a closed loop. Though the returns diminish, the fascinating thing about this chain of sequels, the first great sf movie franchise, is the comics-like way in which

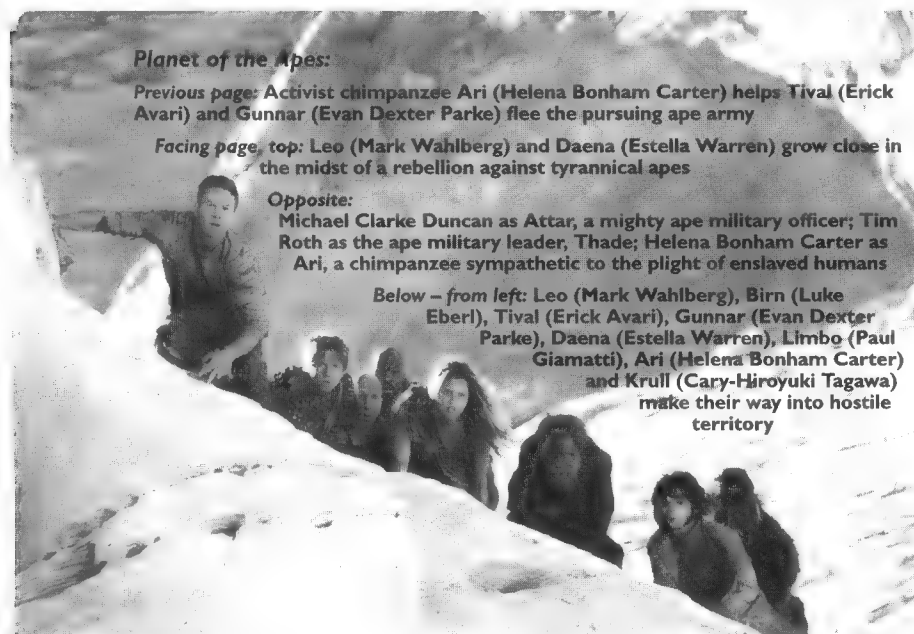
the cleverest narrative arc in sf cinema emerges in fits from the successive attempts to wriggle out of the trap of the previous ending. "The fools," says Roddy, echoing Chuck, as his ship blasts off through time at the start of *Escape*: "They've finally destroyed themselves." With two more sequels and two TV series to come, you just wish.

*Escape's* splashdown opening is homaged in Hamm's unmade *Apes*, much the least solemn interpretation, but fully deserving of its space in the display as not only the most engaging version but the closest to Boule's novel (in outline if not in detail), rebuilding the novel's characters, plot, and satirical concept in a *tour de force* of tongue-in-cheek action cinema. A team of scientists in 2000 pilot a crashed ape spaceship back to Proxima Centauri in search of the suspected source, and thus possible cure, of a degenerative plague on earth, to find a world of speechless unreasoning humans ruled by the now-familiar tri-specialised elite of oranges, chimps, and gorillas, with the surreal twist that the apes' mass culture is full of impossibly close echoes of earth's human media (right down to Bee Gees songs and TV's *The Simians*). A fairly swift descent into some unsalvageably silly action-plotting is redeemed by a particularly wonderful incarnation of the dastardly General Zaius (an import not from Boule but from the Schaffner film), who turns out to be monitoring and mimicking Terran broadcasts in a deranged project of social control; and by a clever hybrid of Boule's and Serling's endings in which our heroes escape to earth, only to find that the apes have taken over or beaten them there (it's not clear which, though there are glimpses from afar of earth's human society falling

apart in the decades that pass) and remodelled ape features on to the Statue of Liberty.

**T**hough brilliant in flashes, all this seems unfortunately to have been just a bit too silly for latter-day Tim Burton, who in any case would have had no interest in Hamm's reinvention of the fable as a media satire. Oddly enough, the one element of the Hamm script to be retained in Burton's curiously lugubrious and pointless version is the jokey ending, creating a jarring clash of tone as well as a narrative puzzle that may or may not have a solution. The far-from-clear implication seems to be that Capt. Davidson's insistence on returning home rather than facing up to his responsibility to the work he's begun has led to the dastardly Thade's escape, triumph, and conquest of space. But so elliptical is the logic that it might not be there at all, and the unhappy impression it gives in the theatres is that the film has left science-fictional reason behind for a kind of freewheeling spoofiness that reads more like a Return to the Planet of *Mars Attacks!* Sadly, this ghostly memory of Boule is about all there is left of the original novel in Burton's carefully-proclaimed "re-imagining" – a term clearly chosen for its meaninglessness, but which nevertheless does mark a sense of awkwardness about claiming this as a remake in any familiar sense of the term. Boule's characters are gone, and yet their bones are still there; the re-imagining doesn't extend much further than a new set of names, eschewing the evocative system of Latinate forms (one of several nods to the sword-and-sandal epics the original series was crafted to evoke), but retaining the key roles of star-wrecked hero, luscious underclad wild-girl slobber interest, liberal chimp heroine with naughty cross-species yearnings, and would-be genocidal simian warlord.

In a better film, this curious palimpsesting might have had a discernible point. Burton's film, however, is full of ghostly traces of earlier versions that meant something once but no more. "Our apes can't talk," says Davidson to Ari, in an exchange familiar from Boule and Schaffner; "Maybe," she counters, "they choose not to because of the way you treat them." Yet in Burton's film, the humans *do* talk. Though the early scenes tease the knowing viewer with the expectation of human speechlessness, this is casually dropped when Kris Kristofferson finally opens his mouth – obliterating at a stroke the earlier versions' key distinction between speaking and speechless primates, turning the struggle of man against monkey into a comfortably



#### Planet of the Apes:

Previous page: Activist chimpanzee Ari (Helena Bonham Carter) helps Tival (Erick Avari) and Gunnar (Evan Dexter Parke) flee the pursuing ape army

Facing page, top: Leo (Mark Wahlberg) and Daena (Estella Warren) grow close in the midst of a rebellion against tyrannical apes

#### Opposite:

Michael Clarke Duncan as Attar, a mighty ape military officer; Tim Roth as the ape military leader, Thade; Helena Bonham Carter as Ari, a chimpanzee sympathetic to the plight of enslaved humans

Below – from left: Leo (Mark Wahlberg), Birn (Luke Eberl), Tival (Erick Avari), Gunnar (Evan Dexter Parke), Daena (Estella Warren), Limbo (Paul Giamatti), Ari (Helena Bonham Carter) and Krull (Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa) make their way into hostile territory



unproblematic struggle for “human rights” in the face of totalitarian oppression, and making Thade’s denial of human reason still more transparently bogus. While this might help the fit as an allegory of purely racial supremacism, it obfuscates any attempt to talk equally about *animal* rights, as well as making it the first *Apes* to eliminate all trace of moral difficulty or ambiguity about the humans’ bid for dominance.

Even so, the plodding insistence on intrinsic human superiority is still there, above all in the astonishing scene between Thade and his dying father – in which the man now known principally for his presidency of the National Rifle Association produces the supreme evidence of human resourcefulness, the planet’s last handgun. (“What you hold in your hand is the proof of their invention, the power of their technology. It has the power of a thousand spears.”) As in *Boulee*, but without the ironic point, the indictment of the apes’ civilization is that they’ve failed to live up to their inheritance by maintaining the technological heights of the human culture they’ve mimicked. It’s typical of the confused follow-through in this version generally that in the event it turns out Davidson’s triumph is secured not by superior intelligence – of which he displays so little that he fails to ask any of the obvious questions on his arrival – but by the convenient discovery of a fully-functioning nuclear reactor.

There are good things here and there, but they’re like ruins poking out of the sand at an angle. First-drafter Frank Broyles’s rationale for the *Apes* scenario is actually the neatest so far, explaining a number of things that remain fuzzy in other versions: why everyone speaks English, why there’s only one ape city on the planet, why



the three ape species have united in a single culture. But Burton reportedly found the Broyles draft too science-fictional (whatever that means), and his rewrite team have left the plot a bizarre tangle of loose ends (what happened to the kid sister?), sloppy logic (if they don’t have advanced technology, what are they playing the bad rock music on?), and howlers (“Was the homo sapien mean to you again?” asks the professional primatologist).

Above all, it’s an unprecedentedly bland production from Burton. Though long-time followers can just about make out a touch of the trademark Scissorhands figure in Ari’s melancholy outsider, she’s by some way the least interesting incarnation yet of either Burton’s character or her own. The feisty research scientist of all earlier *Apes* versions has been reimagined as a doe-eyed princess mouthing wishy-washy slogans (“It’s

disgusting the way we treat humans. It demeans us as much as them”), and while it’s hard to ascribe percentage responsibilities for what you see on screen to Rick Baker’s otherwise-amazing makeup and the actors inside it, neither the foam-latex Ari exofacies nor the strangely-cast H. Bonham-Carter acquit themselves at all well. Tim Roth’s Thade is a glorious creation, no question, and much of the design is as good as it jolly well should be, but for the most part this is a deeply disappointing, deeply mainstream, deeply confused film from the one A-list director who might have made something more of it.

Well, that almost concludes our tour, but I know you’ve all been looking forward to the shocking final twist without which it just wouldn’t be *Planet of the Apes*. Maybe you’ve been thinking we’re all going to turn out to be apes, or humans, or androids, or Hollywood executives, or identical clones of Charlton Heston, or giant talking sea-anemones, or Statues of Liberty, or virtual personalities stored in the meme banks of a crashed space station, or characters in an animated series being watched by all of the above. Maybe we’ve been travelling through space and/or time and/or parallel worlds, and when we come out again we’ll find the Capitol has been remodelled with a big Kong figure climbing up the dome. Maybe I’m going to detonate the Alpha-Omega bomb and destroy the planet, catapulting us back through time to inherit the earth. The truth is, it doesn’t really matter, because this is the Forbidden Zone, and the General’s orders are quite clear. Now if you’d all just line up on the edge of the pit there...

I mean, what were you expecting, free bananas?



# Watching the Sea



Chris Beckett

Dear Jane,  
I've thought about your parting comment the last time we met. You're quite right, of course; I can't expect you to want to be close to me if I insist on keeping my past a secret.

So I'm writing you this. I thought a letter would be best. I think you'll need time to think before you decide how to react. Those lurid rumours about me in the village *aren't* true (that I'm some kind of supergrass, that my face has been altered by plastic surgery) but the truth unfortunately is even stranger. To be honest, I'm scared that you won't believe me – or that if you do you'll not like what you hear.

I don't want to lose you, Jane. I'm tired of losing people I care about. People think I'm content to be on my own, up here on my cliff-top, watching the waves. But I often hate it. It's just that it seems more comfortable than the alternatives.

The other thing, Jane, is that this *is* a secret. I don't want it to be known. There's still a lot of prejudice and fear about people like me. I trust you to keep my secret but do you *want* to? Do you want that burden? If not, chuck this letter away now! I would perfectly understand.

Well, if you are still reading this, here goes:

I'm a shifter. That's the secret. I come from another universe. I took the shifter drug and I went tumbling through the worlds ("*seeds*" as people usually call the stuff – or sometimes "*Schrödinger medicine*"). The world I come from wasn't so very different from this. There was a cliff there just like this one, and a grey house like this on the top of it. And there was an England there, very much like here, although the Prime Minister when I left was a man you've never heard of, and there was a different face on the coins and a different set of people.

That's the strange thing. We think our individual exis-

tence so central and so important, but human individuals are among the most contingent things of all. If your parents had made love one minute later on the night they conceived you, they wouldn't have conceived you at all. A different one of all those millions of sperm cells would have made it to the front of the queue. You would never have existed. Someone else quite possibly would.

And somewhere out there, Jane, that someone else *does* exist. And countless other someone else. There are worlds out there where World War III really happened. There are worlds where people still worship Wotan. Every microsecond, every nanosecond, the universe splits in countless ways. There must be other yous out there, other mes, but there are so many different universes that a shifter hardly ever meets his double. There are billions of worlds. Worlds are more commonplace than those Atlantic waves outside my window, all those tiny wrinkles on that vast skin.

I wish it wasn't so. I would prefer to think there was just one world and that there was an inevitability about the things that happened in it. I don't like knowing that there are endless possibilities. I don't like there being no final arbiter of what's real and what's for the best. Choosing one life and foreswearing all others... It's so very hard. Having to *choose* all the time is a kind of tyranny.

Shifters try and avoid this, but in the end even the life of a shifter is only a single line. Shifters are like drivers who refuse to follow the rules of the road. They drive on the wrong side. They break the speed limit. They go the wrong way down one-way streets.

My mother was killed by a bad driver. He lost control on a corner and came up on the pavement at 60 mph where she was pushing me in my pram. The pram hit a wall and catapulted me right over a hedge to land unscathed in a holly bush in some suburban garden.

People say I was too young to remember, which isn't true at all. It's just that those early memories are *so* big and so pervasive that we don't recognize them as memories. (It's like the background radiation in the sky, coming from the Big Bang. It took astronomers a long time to grasp that the beginning of the universe itself was there to see whichever way they looked.)

There was a sort of void alongside me when I was growing up. I had to keep telling myself that I could not reach the thing I longed for. But life was flat. It lacked a dimension. I had a guilty fascination with forbidden things.

When I left university, I got a job as an immigration officer. It was a strange decision. It shocked my leftish friends. But I told myself it was a dirty job that someone had got to do. There were other reasons too, less conscious ones, to do with boundaries, and to do with the rumours that were starting to circulate about shifters.

It was just about that time, you see, that the police started picking up people who didn't seem foreign, but had no valid ID and whose fingerprints and DNA didn't tally with anything in the national registers. They decided that these apparent non-persons must be illegal immigrants. It didn't quite fit, but it still seemed more

plausible than the stories that they themselves told. So the immigration service was called in.

(After all, even supposing there were such things as parallel worlds, how could a *drug* take you there? How could a drug allow people to travel together? How could a drug bring over people's clothes, the coins in their pockets, their bags?)

But then shifters kept disappearing from locked cells; they vanished in front of sane and solid witnesses. What other explanation was there?

Soon shifters were cropping up every day – and *they* were only the ones we knew about. Many more came and went undetected, bringing shifter seeds and selling them, peddling weird cults and the sweet dream of escape and new beginnings.

And of course this was a threat to society. Seeds allowed people to abdicate responsibility, escape from the consequences of their actions. This couldn't just be tolerated. It had to be policed. And, as a result of our early involvement, our service became the agency responsible.

I got assigned to the section that dealt with it. I was fascinated. I lived for my work, hardly bothering with friends or leisure, travelling up and down the country, staying up until all hours writing reports in hotel rooms and in the cool white carriages of midnight trains. It was this thing about forbidden possibilities, I later realized (with some help from a friend of mine called Jaz). It was the dream of hidden doors.

And it had its temptations.

A shifter once left me a note in an empty cell.

"It's suicide without the drawbacks, mate," he wrote. "You should try it yourself sometime."

People didn't like shifters. They were eerie. They were dangerous. They committed crimes and then disappeared before they could be caught. Vigilante organizations formed (in my world as in yours) and there were strident calls for "something to be done," for the kid gloves to be taken off. There were demands in particular for state-funded housing projects to be sealed off and put in quarantine. ("Special category" estates, as we used to call them). They were often centres of shifter activity, just as they had always been centres for drugs and crime. People spoke of rotten apples and barrels, and even of "social cleansing." (The country's most expensive boarding schools were also hotbeds for shifters, as they'd always been for drugs, but there was no talk of sealing *them* off!)

And just as within the country there were demands to isolate the "special category" estates, so across the world there were demands to isolate *Britain*. England was the epicentre. In *all* the worlds we know about more shifters have appeared in England than anywhere else, and many of them are also devotees of a an Anglo-Saxon cult with gods called Dunner and Lok and Wotty One-Eye. Which ever of the countless millions of parallel worlds the seeds first came from, within that world it seemed that the source was in the island of Britain, and probably in the West of England. We were the rotten apple of the world!

Then one evening, as the nation settled down in front of the TV, it nearly choked on its oven chips. Ordinary

schedules were interrupted for an unprecedented joint announcement by the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Conservative and Labour Alliance (which was the other major party in parliament). A state of emergency had been declared. They had formed a government of national unity. Traditional liberties had been curtailed. The police had been given powers to detain indefinitely all suspected associates of shifters. There would be a mandatory ten-year sentence for the offence of failing to report shifter activity. Media coverage of shifters would be vetted by a new committee of judges and policemen. Newspapers or TV stations could be fined or closed down if they failed to comply; journalists could be sent to prison.

The following morning there was a meeting in my office: 20 of us crammed into a small room to hear a statement from our recently-appointed regional director, a very bright, ambitious former academic, not much older than me. It was from her that we heard for the first time what had actually precipitated the state of emergency.

In a wealthy suburb of Bristol, a gang of shifter berserks had appeared out of nowhere. Stripped to the waist, drunk, heavily armed, tattooed with the hammers and lightening bolts of Dunner, they had begun a savage orgy of rape, arson and murder, leaving 20 lying dead among the burning cars and gutted buildings.

But the raiders cheerfully gave themselves up when armed police showed up. They laughed and made jokes as they were handcuffed and loaded into vans. They had already swallowed seeds, you see. They knew that in an hour or two they'd disappear, like water into sand. Well, as the director said, every society has people in it who would unleash mayhem if they thought they could get away with it.

Among the new laws now being enacted, we learnt, were provisions for suspected shifters to be subjected to compulsory stomach pumps and blood transfusions, so as to wash out the seeds and prevent them from making an escape. Summary execution was seriously being discussed.

But there was another aspect to the new strategy.

What the authorities had realized was that fighting the shifters was almost impossible in isolation. It was like trying to fight crime in a single street, while ignoring all the other streets around. What was needed, somehow, was a concerted effort *between* the different worlds.

"A fairly breath-taking concept, I know," said the regional director. "And you'll object straight away that it's impossible because we have no means of communicating with the other worlds."

She took a sip of coffee. The next bit was going to be a shock.

"Well, yes, that's true," she admitted. "But we now hold a bank of several thousand confiscated seeds. So we do have a means of *travelling* between the worlds. The snag is, as you'll all know, that shifters can't chose the worlds they go to and they can't return to where they came from. We have a means of crossing over but we don't have a

means of getting back. So the task that now needs doing is one that not many people would be prepared to contemplate..."

"You're asking us to *become* shifters?" interrupted one of my colleagues incredulously.

"Well, I suppose I am. I'm asking if anyone is prepared to become a new kind of shifter: an anti-shifter if you like. We are looking for volunteers to cross over to other worlds with all the information we have been able to accumulate. The idea would be to contact the equivalent authorities in those worlds, offer them our data and encourage them to do as we are doing. The hope is that, just as the shifter phenomenon and the shifter culture has spread so rapidly across thousands of worlds, so a new anti-shifter culture can likewise spread, until sufficient information falls into the hands of someone out there in the worlds where the seeds first came from, to enable them to stem the problem at its..."

"What?" people burst out.

"Say goodbye to *everyone*?"

"You could end up anywhere!"

"You could end up *lynched*!"

But I was *excited*. You wouldn't believe how excited I was. It was as if a devout but frustrated monk was offered an opportunity to have sex in the service of chastity.

I would have volunteered on the spot, but for one complication. I loved someone. Someone loved me.

Her name was Jazamine Bright. She was a social worker I had met a few months earlier when I was working on a case. I'd had a few girlfriends in the past, but they'd all been rather brief and superficial affairs. The whole business of intimate relationships (as you may have noticed) is not something that comes so easily to me. But Jaz I loved. I did *not* want to say goodbye to her.

When I told her about the meeting at my office, we were having a drink outside a riverside pub near Worcester. There was a smell of fresh hay, a tractor going up and down a meadow, swallows diving over the soft green water... Crazy berserks from another dimension seemed at that moment like a very distant threat!

We talked about the director's proposal and I told her that in some ways I would love to volunteer. She nodded. She understood me very well. She knew how much I secretly longed to cross over.

"I've been thinking," she said, when I'd just got back from the bar with some more drinks. "Shifters can cross over together can't they?"

"If they stay very close to one another – and make sure they stay close until the seeds have worn off."

"Well, why don't *we* go together then?" she asked as I was sitting down.

I knocked over a full pint glass of beer. Most of it ended in her lap.

Did you see any of those old James Bond movies they revived on the TV the other week? The next bit was rather like that. There was even a boffin character, just like the one who talks Bond through his new gadgets and nags him to take proper care of them. Jaz and I were



each issued with a special backpack equipped with space blanket, torch, gun and so on. We were also given some diamonds which we could sell for cash (the value of the diamonds having been precisely calculated, with wonderful, mad, bureaucratic thoroughness, to be equivalent to five years' salary plus the public service pensions to which we would have both been entitled had we stayed in our present jobs). We were provided with ten shifter seeds each.

And, of course, we were given the information to convey to other worlds: small black boxes containing the entire archive of shifter investigations carried out by our department – all the data we had been able to assemble, all the tentative maps – and also an immense catalogue of information about our own world.

We were given training. We were taught survival skills and conflict management. We were engaged in role-play exercises with other volunteers.

Finally we swallowed seeds.

They tasted of blood and smoke.

Then came a strange, sweet interlude. Jaz and I insisted on leaving our minds behind and going for a walk in the Worcestershire countryside. Trees, cows, houses, five-bar gates: everything in that world had a strange, intense, unbearable sweetness because soon we would lose it for ever.

Three hours later we were walking through a wood when we became aware of a tightening in our muscles and our skin. We grabbed each other's hands.

The trees began to dance.

The ground juddered beneath our feet.

We were thrown from side to side.

A pool appeared and disappeared several times right in front of us.

(And once for a moment there was a small boy squatting beside it with a fishing net. He appeared and then disappeared, as transient as a single whispered syllable.)

Soon we were too nauseous to notice anything. We knelt and threw up on the seething earth. Beechnuts skittered about in front of our eyes. The earth itself lurched up and down like a stormy sea.

But after about five minutes the dancing stopped.

"Oh, thank God!" muttered Jaz, releasing me.

I grabbed her quickly. "Not yet, not yet, don't forget the aftershock."

The aftershock. *All* the shifters reported this.

Sure enough the trees began to dance again for several minutes more, before we were finally able to collapse, rest and recover.

When we finally sat up and looked around we found we were in a wooded hollow much like the one where we started, except that here there was a pool beside us, a large, clear pool with lilies and rushes. The air was warm. It was very quiet: no sound at all except for rustling leaves and birdsong. We couldn't see beyond the hollow. All we could see of this world was the pool and the trees around it.

I don't know why exactly but suddenly we were fran-

tically making love.

Then Jaz waded out into the pool. We were like Adam and Eve in Eden. It was a long time before we reluctantly dressed and put on our packs.

"I'll tell you what," I said, "I'll just walk up to the top there and see what there is to see."

It turned out that in this world the wood was right next to a built-up area. In fact the hollow was completely surrounded by buildings. Jazamine and I, it seemed, the newly arrived emissaries of another universe, had marked this historic moment by having noisy sex and skinny-dipping within a hundred metres of houses and streets. This made me smile. I was about to turn and go back and tell her when I felt the tightening feeling once again. We hadn't expected it, but it was another aftershock.

"Jazamine!" I screamed.

I started to run but it was too late. I was falling: I was falling, falling, falling, until – crash! – I landed in a holly tree.

And there was no pool at the bottom of the hollow. And no Jazamine.

Eventually I wandered out of the wood and found a small road which I began to slowly trudge like a sleep-walker, for want of anything else to do.

But after a short while a rebellious rage erupted inside me. Damn it, she was out there *somewhere*! I was *not* just going to peacefully accept my loss.

And I swallowed not one, but three more seeds.

I found myself in an urban square. There was some kind of meeting going on. No one noticed me except a young chap at the back with deformed feet, who soon came hobbling over. He seemed sympathetic so I let him talk to me. I let him take charge, following him meekly when he said he'd get me something to eat.

But then I saw the top of the green wood over the roofs and chimneys.

"I've done it!" I thought. "I've found the world where I left Jaz!"

The chances against were a trillion to one. You'd be more likely to win the lottery three weeks in a row. But I ran off anyway, ignoring the boy's protests.

It looked easy, but every road that seemed to lead in the wood's direction turned out to be a cul-de-sac. I couldn't find a way through. And the longer I spent trying to find a way, the more my euphoria faded, the more the futility of my search came home to me.

Still, I refused to give up. A couple of hours later, when evening was coming on, I came to a pub. I'd already passed it several times in both directions. I decided to go inside and ask the way.

It turned out there was a door at the back of the pub, with a path that led right down to the wood. But the men in there insisted on satisfying their own curiosity before they let me go. And almost as soon as I opened my mouth my ignorance of their world became apparent. (The place was ruled by women, it seemed. There had been some kind of epidemic that killed off all but a few of the men. These were not the sort of things that one could have carelessly forgotten!) So of course they guessed I was a

shifter. And this turned them suddenly bitter and murderous. One of them spoke of killing me and drinking the seed stuff out of my blood.

I ran, but they didn't bother to follow me, except for that young lame kid who appeared from nowhere, hobbling after me, seemingly anxious to help.

We are all brought up with stories where the hero triumphs over the laws of chance. So I still hoped. I still dimly hoped. But when we got down to the bottom of the wood, there was no Jazamine. In fact there was no pool either, just some sort of reservoir, with a padlocked metal lid.

It was odd. The boy had seemed sympathetic, yet when he saw my disappointment and grief, he got angry and started to yell and jeer at me: *What did I expect? What made me think my story should have a happy ending? Did I really believe there was such a thing as love?*

It didn't matter. I felt that tightness in my skin. Soon he was gone for good.

For a while I was in a dead world. The trees were white, the pool like glass. There was silence such as you've never heard. And a kind of dead, yellow haze over the sun.

Nearby there were silent buildings where corpses lay like dead cockroaches in gardens of desiccated flowers, their brownish-yellow skin stretched tightly over their bones. They had dried up but not decayed. Decay itself requires living things to make it happen.

When I arrived here, I did the dutiful thing, like the good civil servant I am. I made myself known to the authorities. I handed over my black box and my remaining seeds.

The authorities responded exactly as we'd hoped. I was taken to London at once and spent many weeks being debriefed by the shifter control agency (which, in this particular England, is a branch of the Secret Service). They took me seriously; they made a fuss of me; they kept me busy, which was probably just what I needed. They put my information together with theirs, recruited their own anti-shifters and sent them out across the worlds, a step which they'd apparently already been planning. As for me, they gave me new ID papers and employed me as a consultant on a generous salary. I was involved in training the anti-shifter volunteers. I took part in the interrogation and rehabilitation of newly-found shifters (my old job, but with the new twist that now I was one of them). I was much in demand. I gave evidence to committees and subcommittees of the House of Commons, the Lords, the Cabinet and the Privy Council. I even met the King.

One piece of work I became involved in was comparing newspaper archives from my own world with archives here. It turned out that up until 1971, the two were identical, word for word, picture for picture, misprint for misprint. But from then on changes began to appear: first of all very minor changes in phrasing and layout and then increasingly large differences in the news itself. It appeared that the two worlds had bifurcated in about 1970.

Now, this was interesting because all the worlds we had so far heard of seemed to have branched at an earlier stage, even if differences had been small and they

had continued to run largely in parallel...

But never mind all that. For me there was a much, much more personal aspect to all this. You see, I wasn't yet born in 1970 but my mother was. Something as contingent as a freak car accident would never have happened in the same way in two worlds that had diverged, any more than the conception of the exact same child. So in this world my lost dead mum was probably alive and well.

Finding her at once became my sole priority. It was as if all along this had been my *real* hidden purpose, the thing that had drawn me to the forbidden boundary and then beyond, falling so recklessly between the worlds.

She wasn't hard to trace. She was married to my father and living in Guildford. They had two sons. One was called Huw like me, but was six months younger. The other, Griffith, was younger than him by three years.

Both sons were there when I went down to Surrey: Griffith a big medical student in jeans and well-filled rugby sweater, the other Huw a smart young lawyer in a suit. They were both frostily polite, glitteringly hostile, determined to defend their mum and dad against this weird and unwelcome intruder.

"You'll appreciate this has caused a good deal of upset," said the other Huw.

"Our mother's been quite seriously ill recently," said Griffith. "To be honest, a shock like this was the last thing she needed."

"Not of course that he could have been expected to know that," conceded my namesake in the spirit of fair play.

Then they both stood there, coldly waiting.

"Well, I didn't..." I mumbled. "I didn't mean... I just..."

"Poor Huw," she said. "This can't have been an easy journey for you to make."

She was a graceful, pretty woman of 58, recognizably like my dead mother, though 30 years older than the photos I'd grown up with. But I could see almost straight away that she wasn't going to *be* my mum in any sense. She was kind, moved, tearful, but there was no way she would ever regard me as her son, or accept that some other woman who'd died all those years ago was in any way herself. She'd never met me before. She'd certainly not given birth to me. Indeed if she *had* given birth to me, then her own Huw, her own beloved first-born son, would never have existed.

I could understand how she felt. Her husband really did look like the father I knew – if rather sleeker and better dressed – and yet I couldn't possibly have accepted him as my dad. All he did for me was remind me that I had separated myself forever from my real father.

On a platform at Guildford station, a wall inside me finally caved in. I began to scream and shout. Some good soul had to restrain me from chucking myself in front of a train.

After that there was a lot of yelling and struggling and a lot of people coming and going to no obvious purpose – police, doctors, social workers. And somewhere in there the station changed itself into a mental hospital, where I crawled gratefully into a corner and curled up in a ball

while the worlds went skipping and dancing round me without ever seeming to get me anywhere.

Eventually I got some sort of hold on myself. It wasn't easy. It involved facing a bitter truth that I'd always managed to evade: I would never fill that emptiness beside me. There are things in this world that, if we lose them, can't ever be replaced. Sometimes not even the missing thing itself can fill the gap that was left by its original loss.

I couldn't go back to the shifter work. The Secret Service people pensioned me off and I cashed in my diamonds and bought this place. I thought it would be good for me to sit and look at the sea.

(I used to come to this same coast when I was a child in that other England. My dad and I used to come on sad little twosomes. We'd build huge sandcastles down there together in almost total silence, until the chill of evening came and it was time to go back to our B & B for our tomato soup and our baked beans and our early beds.)

As it turned out, even if I'd wanted to go back into shifter work, there would hardly have been a job for me. The problem had all but dried up. (Perhaps the anti-shifter programme worked. Perhaps the source of the seeds was found and sealed up in some other branch of the infinite tree.)

Actually I miss the shifters now. I miss the strangeness of them. I miss their recklessness. I miss the tantalizing

and forbidden scent of other worlds.

And this world has grown lazy in a way, I think, now that it no longer has to ask itself why people might so desperately want to escape it.

But then it's always easy to glamorize things that are safely in the past.

Actually I don't think I'll send you this letter. I'm going to come down and tell you the whole story myself.

I'll give you the letter afterwards, that's what I'll do. Then you can read it later when you've had a chance to pick yourself up off the floor!

Dear Jane, I may have been born in another world, but I'm still only human like you. There's nothing alien about me. I don't even come from a different country.

Come and see me soon. We can sit and watch the sea together.

With my love,

Huw.

**Chris Beckett** lives in Cambridge. His most recent stories in *Interzone* were "The Marriage of Sky and Sea" (issue 153), "The Gates of Troy" (issue 154), "The Welfare Man Retires" (issue 158), "Snapshots of Apirania" (issue 160) and "Marcher" (issue 172). The above new story is a companion piece, although not exactly a sequel, to the last-named.

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To be brutally honest, I was never a great admirer of the late Poul Anderson. Long ago, like any young science fiction reader emerging from David Hartwell's omnivore stage, I needed to make practical decisions about which authors to continue reading and which authors to stop reading, and Anderson ended up in my second category. I know he produced respected novels in his later years demonstrating an active imagination and artistic growth, and someday I may read them. But today, I would celebrate Anderson primarily for one of his early novels, an essential text for anyone seeking to understand science fiction, and that is *The High Crusade*.

To place the novel in context, say that science fiction has three stories to tell about humanity's future. The first is that humans of tomorrow will become extinct or insignificant, supplanted by aliens or their own intelligent creations. This bleak scenario is palatably presented in Clifford D. Simak's *City*, where robots and intelligent dogs replace the humans who abandoned Earth for mindless pleasures, but conveyed more chillingly in stories like Fredric Brown's "Answer," Brian W. Aldiss's "Who Can Replace a Man?" and Mike Resnick's *Birthright: The Book of Man*.

The second story is that the humans of tomorrow will survive but evolve into something superhuman or not quite human in response to changing conditions or as a way to master new environments. Versions of this scenario include some of the genre's most enduring and unsettling works, such as H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* and 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, and George Zebrowski's *Macrolife*.

The third story is that the humans of tomorrow will be precisely the same as today's humans, save that they will travel through space, encounter aliens, harness incalculable cosmic powers, and so on. Such scenarios may further claim that humans will revert to behavioral patterns of the past, like those found in the American West, medieval England, or ancient Rome. This is the future universe of space opera, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and many other science fiction stories and films. Although skilful writers can produce memorable works along these lines, these stories may justifiably be seen as unadventurous, unimaginative, and – given what one might reasonably expect in the future – extremely implausible.

This is the sort of story that I came to associate with Anderson, due to random omnivorous reading that kept me away from innovative novels like *Brain Wave* or *Tau Zero* and instead brought me into repeated contact with Nicholas van Rijn and Ensign Flandry. And the teenage Westfahl simply wasn't impressed. I didn't know what the future would be like,

## Poul Anderson and the Human Crusade

Gary Westfahl

but I knew that it certainly wouldn't involve savvy merchants or diplomats negotiating their way through tiny principalities or vast empires modelled so explicitly upon European history. Authors who wrote such stories, and readers who enjoyed them, struck my snotty young self as incredibly naive.

That Poul Anderson was never naive is powerfully communicated by *The High Crusade*, which seizes, literalizes, and explicitly defends the conceit that the human past is prologue to our future (and does so quite seriously, unlike the inane 1994 film version). Its main text is purportedly a document examined by spacefaring humans of the future amazed to discover an advanced human civilization speaking archaic English near the centre of the galaxy. In 1345 A.D., Brother Parvus writes, an alien spaceship landed in England to begin a conquest of Earth; but its blue-skinned Wersgor occupants were attacked and defeated by English warriors led by Sir Roger de Tourneville. Planning to travel to France and the Holy Land in the huge spaceship, thousands of English men and women under Sir Roger's command were instead diverted by a duplicitous Wersgor navigator to the distant planet Tharixan; but the humans, by means of bluster, cunning, and brute force, conquered its Wersgor overlords and took over the planet. Sir Roger then returned to space, forged an alliance with other alien races, and destroyed the Wersgor empire in a great space battle. The final threat to Sir Roger's burgeoning domain came not from aliens, but from a deceitful comrade, Sir Owain, who deluded his disgruntled wife; after a spirited brawl on board the traitor's spaceship, however, his plans were thwarted.

Throughout this incredible narrative, Anderson confronts and answers all the objections one might make to stories

where replicants of ancient humans successfully master the universe. How could primitive means of fighting prevail against super-scientific weaponry? "The trouble of the Wersgorix was that they had gone too far. They had made combat on the ground obsolete, and were ill trained, ill equipped, when it happened." How could the experiences of European history allow humans to dominate interstellar politics? "On Earth there've been many nations and lords for many centuries, all at odds with each other... we've perforce learned all the knavery there is to know." Why might governments on other planets resemble those of medieval Europe? "Sir Roger de Tourneville established the feudal system on newly conquered worlds... the collapse of Wersgorixan was not unlike the collapse of Rome, and similar problems found a similar answer."

*The High Crusade* thus mounts a sophisticated defence of the apparently unsophisticated plot elements permeating both written and filmed space adventures. Why, in *Flash Gordon* serials and *Star Trek* episodes, does the fate of worlds so often depend upon who wins a chaotic fistfight? Perhaps, no matter how advanced and powerful weapons may become, hand-to-hand, or hand-to-claw, combat will always be the best strategy in some situations. Why do stories of space federations and empires so often have humans running the show? Perhaps something about Earth's tumultuous history prepared us especially well for the problems of fighting enemies and forming coalitions amidst strange alien civilizations. Why do governments on distant worlds so often resemble those of medieval Europe, with kings and princesses, scheming servants and court intrigues? Perhaps that represents the most efficient and humane way to govern isolated worlds inhabited by more than one sentient species.

To be sure, defending the future utility of time-honoured patterns of behaviour may lead into contentious political territory, specifically to the argument that all of humanity's contemporary history – with the organization man and keyboard-wielding nerd replacing the rugged individualist and sword-wielding warrior – represents a tragic and temporary aberration, a veneer of effete civilization that must be wiped away so that manly figures emulating the giants of the past can lead humanity to conquer the universe and fulfil our manifest destiny. Yet as earlier explained, I do not regard recent efforts to achieve an enlightened and egalitarian society as a horrible mistake; and since Anderson, rightly or wrongly, was sometimes linked to this sort of testosterone-driven libertarianism more vocally espoused by the likes of Jerry Pournelle and L. Neil Smith, that may be another reason why I devoted my time to other authors.



Yet *The High Crusade* answers this objection as well, signalling repeatedly that its medieval heroes have, due to their unique experiences, grown wiser than their original contemporaries. After the first victory, Parvus writes, "I returned to the abbey and spent the night on my knees, praying for a sign. But the saints remained noncommittal." The cynical humour initially seems a case of breaking character; yet as the story progresses with fewer and fewer references to seeking religious guidance or finding biblical interpretations for events, one realizes that the elderly Parvus writing this manuscript and his compatriots have moved beyond stolid reliance on simple doctrines to balance their faith with a determination to reach their own decisions in a bizarre environment where ancient texts and precepts offer little assistance. When Sir Roger departs to engage in interstellar diplomacy, he leaves his wife to govern the conquered planet, which she does very well, suggesting a newfound confidence in women's abilities. (She is also the person who, after belatedly recognizing Sir Owain's treachery, resolves the conflict by calmly killing him and his alien cohort.) While striving to defeat the Wersgorix, Sir Roger interacts courteously with aliens resembling cats, centaurs, and octopuses, indicating a developing respect and tolerance for beings unlike himself. Most strikingly, Parvus begins his manuscript by stating that he writes at the behest of "Archbishop William, a most learned and holy prelate"; at the end of the novel, we learn that "Archbishop William" is in fact Huruga, the former Wersgor governor of Tharixan who (like many of his fellow Wersgorix) converted to Christianity. Anderson might agree, then, that we should not overly romanticize our ancestors, that they were backward and narrow-minded in many respects; but he argues that such people would inexorably progress beyond such failings as fundamentalism, sexism and racism in response to the variegated stimuli of space travel. The universe of *The High Crusade* is not conquered simply by medieval warriors, but by medieval warriors who retained their basic character while being tempered and improved by their new circumstances – people who combine, one could maintain, the best of humanity's past and humanity's present.

It is a vision not to be lightly dismissed. Many theories have been proposed to explain why film and television science fiction is so popular nowadays, while print science fiction is so relatively unpopular, and it won't hurt to toss one more idea on the table. For the last 20 years, the predominant philosophy in written science fiction has been that the human body is obsolete; in his 1986 introduction to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, Bruce Sterling identifies as "themes that spring up repeatedly

in cyberpunk"... "The theme of body invasion: prosthetic limbs, implanted circuitry, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration. The even more powerful theme of mind invasion: brain-computer interfaces, artificial intelligence, neurochemistry – techniques radically redefining the nature of humanity, the nature of the self." His novel *Schismatrix* portrays future humans arguing not over whether to alter the human body, but only whether to alter it using machinery or genetic engineering. Works produced by the contemporary authors who garner critical respect usually follow science fiction's second story, with every future human sporting implants or body modifications, having evolved beyond the merely human to survive in some perilous underground world. Yet in media science fiction, future people are just like us; they may be surrounded by exotic aliens and high-tech gizmos, but they still look and act pretty much like people today, or even (as noted) like people of previous centuries.

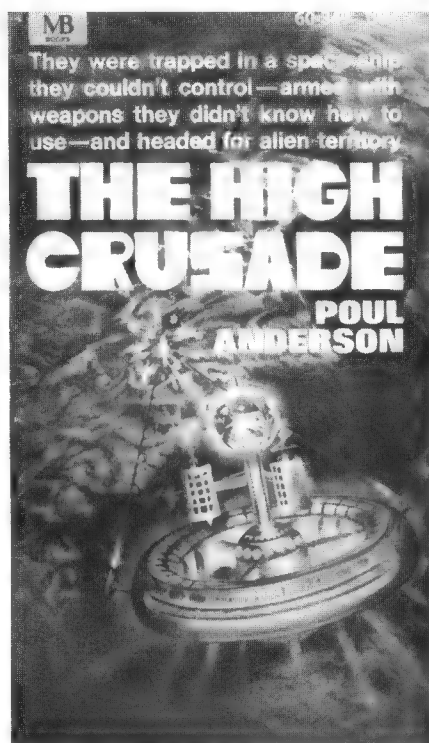
Of course there are exceptions: recent films like *Gattaca* and *Johnny Mnemonic* reflect the cyberpunk embrace of transformed humanity, and descendants of Anderson's de Tourneville, van Rijn, and Flandry, like David Weber's Honor Harrington, have recently appeared in print, carrying on in a recognizably human manner. Yet science fiction film and television may have eclipsed the literature in popularity because they generally feature characters who resemble their audiences, whereas modern novels may feature characters who have elected to bear little resemblance to their audiences.

From Sterling's perspective, this

might mean only that science fiction writers of his school are visionaries speaking to other visionaries, whereas the hacks working for film and television are muddled reactionaries pandering to similarly muddled viewers. Yet their seeming simple-mindedness may conceal a deeper wisdom. Consider the development of humanity from our origins millions of years ago until the 15th century, the age before science. Humans during those times accumulated a tremendous amount of *lore*, practical skills in growing crops, forging armour, constructing windmills, and the like, but they lacked the understanding of unifying principles which marks true science, and which led to the accelerated progress of the last five centuries. Still, as demonstrated by the medieval Europeans of *The High Crusade* and, in a different way, by the achievements of medieval China, human beings armed only with the abilities and intelligence bred into them managed pretty well, all things considered. And while humanity has greatly advanced by means of science, and may advance even more by means of future science, it remains possible that the human being moulded by millennia of evolution, the human being that progressed from caves to castles, just might, tempered by the enlightened attitudes of the present, represent a sturdier and more capable citizen of the future than the human being to be constructed in our laboratories.

I'm not necessarily sure that this is true, but I cannot deny the logic and emotional appeal of the argument, which is virtually intrinsic to science fiction, in many ways a conservative genre despite its futuristic concerns. James Gunn often argues that Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations" represents a "touchstone story" for science fiction, since only a person who understands science fiction can appreciate it; and I respectfully disagree, as someone who both understands science fiction and despises that flat, idiotic tale. Instead, I suggest *The High Crusade* is a true touchstone story to determine one's ability to appreciate science fiction. Even the most sophisticated readers of science fiction should be able to enjoy *The High Crusade*, should be moved by its energetic yet sombre portrait of simple human attributes overcoming the daunting challenges of a cold, vast universe, should fall under the spell of Anderson's craft and creativity to root for Sir Roger and his medieval comrades as they fight to conquer the stars. And if readers cannot respond at least fitfully to this intoxicating narrative, the sort of story that Poul Anderson did so well and the sort of story that reverberates so forcefully throughout the genre, then I would argue that they cannot understand science fiction.

Gary Westfahl



# The Waiting Room

*Zoran Zivkovic*

Miss Adele did not like travelling.

She had not enjoyed it much even in her younger days, and as the years passed she found the occasional need to travel ever less agreeable. But she could not avoid this trip, though there was nothing in its favour. First of all it was winter, and one of the harshest to hit the region in a long time, with heavy snowfalls that completely disrupted the rail system. The schedules had become unreliable, as the snowdrifts not only slowed the trains down but often stranded them for hours in the middle of nowhere. Moreover, the general situation was gloomy and tense. Although everyone felt that war would not break out before spring, no one would have been very surprised should it come much sooner.

When Miss Adele received the news that her younger sister, Mrs Teresa, had been taken ill, her first thought was that this was a threefold vexation. She was naturally upset at her sister's illness, which came as a complete surprise, but she found the two necessities resulting from this misfortune almost as irksome. She would certainly have to visit her sister. That, even if everything went well, meant an exhausting five-hour train journey, and in such bad weather the trip's duration might be open-ended. She could already see herself shivering in an unheated compartment, in who knows what kind of company, as the train stood hopelessly trapped in the middle of a gloomy, white wasteland. But even that would be preferable to the meeting that awaited her.

She had never forgiven Teresa for marrying that man and going off with him so far away, leaving her alone. Adele had disliked him at first sight. He was so full of himself, so negative, and cynical as only men know how to be. And then there were those watery eyes of his that looked derisively down at you, and his thick, red beard that smelled of tobacco smoke even when he wasn't smoking that horrible pipe. What had Teresa seen in him, anyway? He certainly made her suffer, poor thing, although she was too proud to admit it. Miss Adele had

reminded her sister on each of her rare visits, usually made alone, that she could come back to the family home whenever she wanted. But Teresa had refused to even talk about it, sometimes quite rudely, even though her older sister had only wanted what was best for her, as always.

The telegram she had received from him was worded so as to inflict maximum worry through a dearth of information. He had done it on purpose, of course. "Teresa sick STOP Wants to see you STOP Jacob." Truly, what could she conclude from that? How serious was Teresa's condition? It must be quite serious, or she would never have asked her to come in such weather. And what disease had she caught, all of a sudden? Maybe it wasn't all of a sudden. It wouldn't have surprised her a bit if Teresa had been sick for a long time next to that man, but had hesitated to tell her sister about it. As soon as Adele had gauged his character, and it had not taken her long, hadn't she warned Teresa that she wasn't safe with him, that he might even be the death of her? But Teresa, with her lack of understanding and simple, open-hearted nature, had waved that dismissively away.

She tried to call her sister on the phone, something she did very rarely and unwillingly, always horrified at the thought that *he* might answer the phone. She had no desire to hear his voice, let alone talk to him. Now, of course, she must steel herself to endure that unpleasantness – but the long-distance lines were down. Even when the weather was nice it was hard to make long-distance calls. The blizzard must have brought down the lines somewhere. It was a wonder that she had received the telegram.

So she had no choice but to head for the railway station and catch the afternoon train. She might have called information first to see if there were any delays, but in the turmoil that overcame her that never crossed her mind. She quickly packed some warm clothes in a small suitcase, then put a full hot water bottle on top of them

as final protection in case the train got stuck in a snow-drift. She filled a thermos with tea and, after a moment's hesitation, added a little of the rum she used to make holiday cakes. She included a box of the cookies that she usually nibbled with her tea and, as a final afterthought, put in another box.

When she arrived at the station she learned that the train was indeed late, but no one knew by exactly how long; more specific information was expected in about half an hour. The man at the window where she bought her ticket gave her a compassionate look when he heard where she was going, and suggested she take a seat in the station restaurant or in the waiting room. Miss Adele had never sat by herself in a restaurant, so she headed for the waiting room.

The corridor that led to the waiting room was full of soldiers. They stood talking in small groups or sat dozing on grey wooden footlockers or even on the cold floor, their rifles leaning against the wall. They looked exhausted and there were patches of fresh mud on their untidy uniforms. Most of them were smoking cigarettes; a thick, bluish cloud of smoke hung motionless in the gloomy corridor. Miss Adele felt ill at ease as she made her way through them, head bowed and hand held over her mouth and nose, although no one paid any attention to her.

The waiting room was not very full. Only a calamity of the sort that had befallen her could force people to travel in such cold. Miss Adele found a seat in the corner across from a family of three sitting to the right of the entrance. The man was tall and thin, sitting stiffly, already bald although he was barely into his 30s. He had taken off his coat and placed it neatly on the bench next to him beside a rather large travel bag, but he had kept his long, blue woollen scarf round his neck. His wife seemed disproportionately small compared to him. She was wearing a cute little grey hat the same shade as her fur coat, which she had only unbuttoned, although the waiting room was heated by a tall tile stove. Her cheeks were ruddy and her forehead was lightly beaded with sweat. Between them sat a little girl about six years old. She had inherited her mother's lack of height, so her short legs dangled, swinging restlessly, not touching the floor. Whenever she banged the heels of her

high-topped shoes together her father would look at her reproachfully, but without saying a word. The little girl frequently raised her lips to her mother's ear to whisper something, and her mother would reply briefly in a low voice. From time to time she wiped her daughter's nose with a large, white handkerchief.

On the other side of the waiting room, across from the stove and next to one of the windows that gave onto the empty platforms, sat a stocky officer with a heavy moustache curled upwards and waxed at the points. His heavy overcoat and sheepskin hat were hanging from a hook on a nearby wall, and a small puddle of melting snow spread around his boots. He was engrossed in a brochure, although the weak light from outside made reading rather difficult, so that he had to hold it close to his face. On the bench nearest the stove, leaning against a small hand

organ, dozed an old man of very unsavoury appearance. His unshaven face was gaunt and heavily wrinkled, and everything he wore seemed old and tattered. The rim of his hat was ragged, gloves that had once been white now showed fingertips in two or three places, while a crooked bow tie, a thin coat with two large, conspicuous patches and flat shoes that were certainly not suited to such snow completed his ensemble.

Miss Adele did not mind waiting very much; she was accustomed to it. She had spent most of her life waiting. In her younger days it had often made her restive, although she had been unable to say exactly what she was waiting for. In any case, whatever she was expecting had never happened, and she had long since reconciled herself to that. Now she was only saddened when she felt that all she really had left was to wait for her life to pass. Like the small woman, she did not take her coat off, though she unbuttoned it. She sat with

her hands folded on the muff in her lap, staring blankly out of the window.

Although it was only mid-afternoon, it had already begun to grow dark. The wind had died down temporarily, allowing the big, fluffy snowflakes to fall straight down, as if in dreamy slow-motion, and so thickly that buildings on the other side of the platform were barely visible. The silence of the gloomy waiting room was broken infrequently: somewhere outside could be heard the distant rhythmic banging of a hammer, and from the corridor



echoed the muffled laughter of several soldiers. The little girl continued to bang her heels together from time to time despite her father's obvious displeasure. In the tile stove the large logs emitted occasional sharp crackles.

Miss Adele started out of her reverie when she heard the hand-organ. Staring out the window, she had not noticed when the ragged old man woke and picked up his instrument. She had never liked music – it was always too loud for her. She had a radio at home, but even on those rare occasions when she listened to it, she always kept the sound low. She glanced angrily at the organ-grinder. Such people should be excluded from waiting rooms, she thought – or at least they should be ordered not to bother decent people with their noisy instruments. She turned, expecting to see similar views expressed on the faces of the other occupants, but all remained strangely indifferent, paying no attention to the musician.

Then Miss Adele experienced her first vision. She had just directed another angry look at the organ-grinder when, although she could still hear him playing, he disappeared – suddenly, and without warning, along with everything else that had been within her field of vision a moment before. Something else appeared instead. The waiting room was still there, but on the edges, like some sort of frame, as if a smaller picture had been placed over a larger one.

The smaller picture showed a room principally occupied by a large brass bedstead. It looked familiar to Miss Adele, but in her initial confusion she was not able to place it, nor did she recognize the woman lying motionless in the bed, with the eyelids closed on her pale, drawn face, and hands crossed on her chest. She only realized what she was looking at when the taller of the two men sitting beside the bed raised his head and turned his watery eyes briefly in her direction. He then turned back towards the priest on the other chair, who was absorbed in reading a prayer aloud from his breviary, and said something to him that she could not hear.

Miss Adele gasped in pain and raised her hands to her mouth. Her muff slipped off her lap. Her whole body shook, and her head was spinning. Only after several long moments of great effort was she able to regain partial control of herself. This certainly cannot be true, she tried to convince herself. Teresa could not be dead, if only because Jacob, with his malicious, hateful nature, would not for a moment have hesitated to inform her, taking pleasure in the suffering that news would cause her. His telegram had only said her sister was sick. It didn't even say seriously – simply, sick.

This was only a silly apparition, she thought, although very convincing, and that terrible organ-grinder was to blame. He had completely addled her brain with his impudent and unexpected music. Really, how dare he? It was only then that she realized she could see him again. He was no longer concealed by a ghostly picture. He had stopped turning the handle of his dilapidated organ, and was watching her from the other end of the waiting room. Four other pairs of eyes were looking askance at her.

Her gasp must have caught their attention. What did they think of her now? That she was a senile old woman

living in some imaginary interior world? Or even that she was clinically insane? If they knew what had just appeared to her, their conjectures would be completely confirmed. Just look at what an unseemly situation such a vagrant could bring upon a decent woman! It was because of unpleasant encounters like this that she was so disinclined to travel, or even go out among other people. Miss Adele bent down and picked her muff off the floor. She shook it gently and returned it to her lap, then waited stoically for the inquisitive stares to turn away.

The silence that reigned once again did not last long. It was broken by the old man near the tile stove, though this time not with his music. He was overcome by an attack of dry, wheezy coughing that appeared to come from the very bottom of his lungs. It seemed as if he would never be able to stop; at times it even resembled a death rattle. Although she was sitting some distance away, Miss Adele nonetheless took out her lace-edged handkerchief to cover her mouth, just in case. The last thing she needed right now was to get sick, like her sister. When the organ-grinder finally caught his breath, he stood up slowly, straightened his untidy clothes, raised his bulky instrument and headed ponderously for the door. Miss Adele felt relieved when he left. She only hoped that he had gone for good.

It was already quite dark in the waiting room, but it was not clear who should turn on the light. That was finally resolved by the officer, since he could no longer read beside the window. He laid the open brochure on the bench and headed towards the switch by the door, his boots squeaking on the bare wooden floor and leaving a wet trace. The very moment that light poured over the large room from two bare bulbs in the high ceiling, Miss Adele's ears were once again filled with the organ-grinder's music. She thought at first that he was playing for the soldiers in the corridor, even though the music was quite clear, as if he were still here in the waiting room. But she had no time to wonder at this curiosity for just then she experienced a second vision.

The officer was returning to his seat when he was suddenly concealed by the smaller picture. Miss Adele could still hear his sloshing footsteps on the floor, but now she saw him not in the waiting room, but in some dark, bomb-cratered landscape. He was advancing cautiously, crouched down, revolver in hand, leading a small squad of soldiers, making his way through dense fog or smoke. Noiseless flashes flared up suddenly in this greyness, forcing the soldiers to hit the ground. As they were getting up after the third explosion, the officer suddenly grabbed his neck with both hands. He stood there, frozen for a moment or two, and then slowly sank to the ground. His hands fell along with his body, revealing blood pouring in torrents from a gaping wound in the middle of his throat. It soaked the upper part of his overcoat that a moment before had been hanging from a hook in the waiting room.

Miss Adele quickly covered her mouth with her handkerchief, smothering a cry of horror. Terrified by the appalling scene, she closed her eyes tightly. Her rapid heartbeat seemed to boom loud as a drum. She waited for



her pulse to calm down a bit before she dared to look again, shuddering, at what she feared to see. But when she opened her eyes, all that greeted her was the innocuous waiting room, now harshly lit. The officer was sitting calmly in his seat by the window, once again intent on his reading.

Although she was not in the least inclined to stare at people, and particularly not at people she didn't know, for some time she could not take her eyes off the officer's powerful neck. The vision was gone, but the image of blood pouring unquenchably from it was vivid in her memory. He must have been hit by a stray bullet or shrapnel fragment. The wound seemed serious, so he had certainly lost a lot of blood before anyone could help him. How awful! thought Miss Adele. He was still relatively young. It was extremely unfair to die like that. She had to warn him of what awaited him. Then maybe he could avoid such a fate.

But she didn't do anything. She sat in her seat and finally, with great effort, lowered her eyes to her hands in her lap. What could she tell him, anyway? That she had seen a vision? That she had seen him die in a cratered battlefield? That it was all because of that ragged organ-grinder's music? She would only get tangled up in her attempts to explain something to him that she herself did not understand. He would think her an old fool, bothering people with her prattle. And what if the vision were wrong, just like the one of Teresa on her deathbed? She would look ridiculous! It was all so unpleasant. What had she done to deserve this, in addition to all her other troubles?

Somewhere from the distance came the drawn-out whistle of a locomotive. Miss Adele turned hopeful eyes to the windows. The sooner the train arrived, the sooner her suffering here would end. She expected the public-address system, located conspicuously above the door of the waiting room, to announce the train's arrival in the station, but it remained silent. Several minutes later a seemingly endless string of cars began to pass slowly by one of the platforms, a black clattering stream sliding through the barely paler night. From its lack of lighted windows, Miss Adele concluded that it must be a freight train, not scheduled to stop at the station. But if this train had arrived, that meant the track was passable.

The little girl sitting between her parents whispered something to her mother again. She nodded, and the two of them got up and headed out of the waiting room, holding hands. Father continued to sit there stiffly, staring straight ahead, paying them no attention. The moment the door closed behind the mother and daughter, the organ-grinder announced a new vision. Once again, he played so loudly and clearly that Miss Adele suddenly looked in suspicion at the two men sitting there, seemingly deaf to this obtrusive music, before she returned her fearful attention to the ominous, smaller picture, unconsciously clutching her handkerchief.

The inside of the car was cramped, particularly the back seat where the little girl was sitting. She seemed somewhat older, by maybe two or three years. She was

surrounded by piles of luggage and even had a small suitcase in her lap. Father was driving and he often turned his head to say something to mother on the seat next to him. Although she couldn't hear him, Miss Adele concluded by his wife's demeanour that he must be reprimanding her. Her head was bowed, and she frequently raised her fingers to wipe away tears.

Everything happened very quickly: the lights of another car suddenly appeared around a curve, aimed straight at them; mother opened her mouth in a silent cry, her eyes staring; daughter instinctively lifted the suitcase to shield herself; father wrenched the steering wheel to avoid the collision, but was unable to turn it back again in time. The car flew off the road and started to plunge down a steep hillside, rolling over and over. Seen from inside, the car seemed to be immobile while the whole world spun madly around it. And then there was a violent crash against a boulder at the bottom of the cliff and flames that suddenly engulfed the whole of the smaller picture.

This time Miss Adele did not even try to hold back her cry. She jumped up from her seat, holding her muff so that it didn't fall to the floor again. The fiery image suddenly melted before her when she changed position, to be replaced by two bewildered faces. But now they made no difference – no more misgivings about inappropriate behaviour could stop her.

What had happened to the officer was horrifying, but his death had at least been something one could expect, a professional risk run in the line of duty, while this was a true tragedy. An entire family – and the child in particular! She had only begun to live, so to speak. No, this could not be allowed. Even if she looked ridiculous and they thought she was a crazy old fool, the child must be saved. Adele had to tell father about this fateful event. All at once she felt certain that it would take place, that all the visions she had seen would come to pass. This, of course, meant that the vision about Teresa must also be a true one, but right then the inexorability of that event seemed less important to her.

She walked over to the man with the blue scarf and went straight to the point. "You must drive carefully, sir. You mustn't argue with your wife. Because another car will appear and then..."

She did not have time to tell him what would happen. The loudspeaker suddenly crackled and a mechanical female voice announced the arrival of the long-awaited passenger train. The door to the waiting room opened at the same instant and mother and daughter returned. Behind them came the sounds of the soldiers' commotion in the corridor. The woman looked at her husband inquisitively as she came up to him, but he only shrugged. The officer rushed past them, trying to put on his overcoat with one hand while holding his sheepskin hat and brochure in the other.

Miss Adele knew that she had to go on, that what she had said was insufficient and confused. She could tell by his expression that he hadn't understood a thing and didn't believe her. But somehow she couldn't find the right words. A feeling of increasing helplessness came

over her as the precious seconds passed, and with them the chance to do something. Instead she just stood there, mute and foolishly staring. Finally, father ran out of patience. He picked up his coat and travel bag from the bench and led his wife and daughter towards the exit.

Miss Adele was left alone in the waiting room, feeling useless and discomfited. She had not succeeded in warning them, and had made a fool of herself by trying. If she tried to approach them again on the train, they would certainly refuse to listen to her. Yet she had to do something – she couldn't give up on a matter of literal life and death. But in her overwhelming panic she could think of nothing. She heard the rhythmic clacking of metal wheels outside, and soon the nearest platform was filled with a moving string of lighted windows. That snapped Miss Adele out of her paralysis. She would think of something later, now she had to hurry. Since the train was late it would certainly not stay in the station very long.

She picked up her suitcase and hurried towards the corridor. The soldiers were no longer scattered but had assembled into two columns, ready to move out, the officer to the fore, giving sharp orders. Just as Miss Adele was heading past the military formation towards the platform, the organ-grinder's music started to blare all around her. At first she thought the ragged old man had somehow reached the public-address system and was now seeking to cheer the entire station with his unbearable music through all the loudspeakers. It was so loud that she wished she had both hands free, so she could cover her ears. But that desire soon lost urgency in the face of another vision.

She could not see the context; there was nothing but a pile of bodies. They covered the entire smaller picture, in which nothing moved: these were the corpses of the young soldiers she now heard marching in the background. Death had visited them in countless horrific forms. Here the back of a head was blown off, there was a bloody hole instead of an eye; scattered intestines, a red crater across a chest, stumps where there used to be legs, torsos without heads, unrecognizable joints of human flesh... some battlefield's insane harvest of youth curtailed and beauty mutilated.

Miss Adele started to trip over her feet, losing balance. The last of the marching soldiers turned towards her briefly but had no chance to offer help. Their commanding officer was in a hurry to see his detachment settled on the train to military glory. She was overcome by nausea. With her hand over her mouth, leaning against the wall, she staggered down the corridor and found herself in the station's main hall. She headed for the restroom, not the platform, but ran into two waves of arriving passengers heading for the exit. In other circumstances this would have embarrassed her exceedingly, but now she barely even noticed.

Miss Adele spent a long time leaning over the toilet bowl, until her stomach was completely empty. Although it had been very disagreeable, vomiting had brought some relief. She splashed her pale face with icy water from the sink, then wiped it with her lace-edged handkerchief,

neglecting to remove the drops that had sprinkled on the upper part of her coat. When she finally returned to the station hall, it was empty. The train was long gone, bearing into the snowy night people about whom she knew what she would have given anything not to know.

When she went back to the window to get a refund on her ticket, the ticket-seller had no way of understanding the sudden sigh that escaped from her as she watched him work, nor the bewilderment that appeared in her eyes, as if they were looking at something terrible, and not these commonplace surroundings. He was even less able to hear the repetitious music of the organ-grinder ringing in her ears – unsurprisingly, since there was no organ-grinder nearby.

The taxi driver who picked her up from the station was equally confused. Looking at her for a moment in his rear mirror, he saw her hold her hands over her ears and shake her head, eyes tightly closed. He was used to passengers acting oddly at times, but they were usually young people, not serious-looking, elderly women. He thought of asking her if she needed help, but abandoned the idea. He was suddenly sure he could do nothing to help this lady.

Back home, Miss Adele found a new telegram on the mat below the front door. She locked it away unread, with the previous telegram in the carved wooden box where she kept her photo album and old letters. There was no need to open it, since she knew what it said. Just as she knew she would not go to Teresa's funeral. Not because the trip would be too strenuous, nor because she could not tolerate Jacob, but because she would inevitably encounter people along the way. And that had already become a nightmare she could hardly endure.

She had not been one to go out much before, and now she scarcely left the house. This did not seem unusual to any of the neighbours, since she was known to be a woman of retiring character who was not on intimate terms with anyone. Her behaviour had become rather strange, indeed, whenever she ran into anyone, but it is well known that old maids sometimes lose their way.

Miss Adele's final wait took its time. She would have found it easier to bear could she have seen the end, but the organ-grinder who played for everyone else refused to play for her. After pondering this at length, she could not tell whether he was being especially kind to her or whether this was his worst damnation.

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Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

Translation edited by Christopher Gilmore

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**Zoran Zivkovic** lives in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, and is now *Interzone's* most frequently-published foreign-language contributor. The above new piece is the fourth in a cycle of subtly interconnected fantasies – to be called *Seven Touches of Music*. The stories may be read in any order.

REPORT FROM FARPOINT

# So Long, and Thanks for All the Thought

Tim Robins

A fan of Douglas Adams once wrote to the author asking for a short autobiography. Adams replied: "Born 1952. Haven't died yet." Alas, as of May 12th this year, the latter is no longer true.

Adams's death was marked by number of tributes and retrospectives. Television contributed an *Omnibus* documentary, *So Long Douglas Adams, and Thank You for Everything* (BBC 2, 13 May 2001), preceded by a repeat of the TV series of Adams's greatest creation, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. This provided a good opportunity to evaluate the television adaptation, not simply as an adaptation of the radio series, but as a version of *Hitchhiker's* in its own right. (*Hitchhiker's* has appeared in a variety of media including radio, audio and video cassette, TV, records, books and theatre with a number of variations in the plot.)

While recognizing *Hitchhiker's* as humorous science fiction hasn't been a problem, there has been much less agreement about the nature of that humour. Peter Nicholls, writing in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, comments: "Behind the extremely funny absurdity of the series there seems to be a mournfully nihilist view of life... where nothing means very much at

all." Other critics suggest *Hitchhiker's* is satirical, but differ about the target of that satire.

Tise Vahimagi, in the British Film Institute's *British Television: An Illustrated Guide*, suggests the series is "a marvellous satire of science-fiction concepts and conventions." John Clute's *SF: The Illustrated Encyclopedia* states that it "hilariously spoofed all government, all authority, all wisdom and all high-toned visions of the road to the future. It's hard to think of a cliché that did not turn up in these scripts." Similarly, a short piece by Michael Bywater in *The Independent* (12 May 2001) suggested Adams's "genius" was "in using comedy to make serious points about the world" including "the fallacies of religion." These accounts relate the programme to satire in its widest sense as work that, usually humorously, exposes vices or follies.

For those unfamiliar with the series, *Hitchhiker's* follows the picaresque adventures of Arthur Dent (Simon Jones), a Home Counties Earthman who is whisked across time and space by his best friend, Ford Prefect (David Dixon), galactic playboy Zaphod Beeblebrox (Mark Wing-Davey), Trillian (Sandra Dickinson), a mathematician, and Marvin (voiced by

Stephen Moore), a paranoid android. When the Earth is destroyed by a Vogon Constructor Fleet to make way for a hyperspatial express route, Dent learns that the planet was a giant organic computer created on behalf of pan-dimensional beings to calculate the answer to the question of life, the universe and everything. That answer was 42. The question now resides in the mind of Dent.

Much of *Hitchhiker's* consists of absurd monologues, many spoken by the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy itself (voiced on both radio and TV by Peter Jones). The Book sometimes operates "in character," providing guidance to Dent and Prefect, sometimes narrates the travellers' adventures and addresses the audience, and, on occasions, becomes a meta-guide, discussing its own origin and its place in the *Hitchhiker's* universe. The TV series illustrates these monologues with filmed inserts and painstaking animation made to resemble, by today's standards, rather simplistic computer graphics. These remain the series' most successful element. Less successful are the characters' monologues. On screen, it is clear that the director was not entirely certain how, for instance, the characters should react during Marvin's lengthy

laments. During the first of these, Dent and Prefect just stare blankly off-screen.

What the series' numerous expositions leave us with is a collection of humorous lines ("life, the universe and everything," "life, don't talk to me about life" and "you're never alone with a rubber duck"), objects (towel, digital watches) and, of course, a number (42). During the programme, these acquire amusing connotations they previously didn't have. *Hitchhiker's* also makes use of a single double-entendre (the computer, Deep Thought).

Like much comedy, *Hitchhiker's* is constructed around incongruities. In fact, Adams's script calls attention to its own use of incongruity. So The Book tells us that the Vogan Constructor Fleet, sent to demolish the Earth, "hung in the air exactly the way bricks don't." Again, when Dent activates the improbability drive on board the space ship, *The Heart of Gold*, the narration explains that, against all probability, "a sperm whale had suddenly been called into existence some miles above the surface of an alien planet... this is not a naturally tenable position for a whale." This example illustrates a number of incongruities: one, by placing a whale in an incongruous setting (above a planet), another, by having The Guide deliver such an absurd narrative. Of course, the sequence is also interesting because it represents the plot and sentiment of *Hitchhiker's* in miniature. The whale begins with questions about life, the universe and everything, then, just as life becomes meaningful and fun, it hits the ground and dies.

The series also creates a set of incongruities around Dent and his travelling companions. Dent's costume, dressing gown and pyjamas, provides an incongruous counterpoint to the alien environment (although, for me, this potentially amusing juxtaposition had already been milked for nearly two decades in *Doctor Who*). On TV, Trillian is played with a squeaky American accent and peroxide blonde hair, and appears to conform to the dumb-blonde stereotype. Her behaviour also corresponds to stereotypical representations of women in TV sf: serving drinks and falling into Beeblebrox's (three) arms at times of danger. This is juxtaposed with Trillian's intellect (she has degrees in maths and astrophysics).

Trillian's on-screen American persona points to another set of incongruities that runs throughout *Hitchhiker's*: the juxtaposition of Dent as a Little Englander and the crass Americanized galaxy he encounters. Dent, a bastion of a civilized, British way of life, is confronted at every turn by representatives of Americanness,

from the "have-a-nice-day" doors, to a galaxy apparently populated by superficial celebrities including pop psychologists and chat-show hosts (chat shows, at the time of the series' broadcast, being wrongly believed to be a hideous American invention making incursions in to Britain's TV schedules). Galactic Americanism makes Dent's milieu look decidedly small-town; Dent's stoicism makes galactic society look superficial.

Adams's main technique for creating incongruity is through various forms of bathos. Here bathos refers not to its more common use (as a criticism of failed attempts to be profound) but to its related sense as a ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace. Again, Adams literalizes his technique so that the whale makes an actual ludicrous descent to the surface of Magrathea. The fall turns a living, reasoning being into mere whale meat.

Adams continually undercuts the elevated emotions of his characters. Prefect's excitement at being rescued by the legendary Zaphod Beeblebrox is undercut when Dent reveals he has met Beeblebrox at a party where the alien had adopted the more mundane name of "Phil." Adams also undercuts the emotions of the audience. So, as missiles are launched at *The Heart of Gold*, the Book tells viewers: "Stress and tension are now serious social problems in all parts of the galaxy and it is in order that this situation should not be in any way exacerbated that the following facts should now be advanced..." Viewers are then reassured that the attack causes no loss of life, only a slight bruising of a character's upper arm.

I would suggest that Adams's bathetic technique works against the emotional core of science fiction – its sense of wonder. This is signalled right from the start by the theme music, which juxtaposes a sweeping orchestral score with the plucking of a banjo. Marvin the Paranoid Android seems created solely to undermine any excitement the characters (and readers) might feel on encountering the mysteries of the *Hitchhiker's* universe. Thus, Marvin responds bathetically to Dent's awe at the alien world in which he finds himself and seemingly provokes Dent's enthusiasm in order to undercut it:

Dent: Look, Robot. The stars are coming out.

Marvin: I know, wretched isn't it?

Dent: But that sunset. I've never seen anything like it in my wildest dreams. It was like mountains of fire, boiling into space.

Marvin: I've seen it, it's rubbish.

Dent: We only had the one sun at home.

I came from a planet called Earth, you know.

Marvin: I know. You keep going on about it, it sounds awful.

Dent: Oh no, it was a beautiful place.

Marvin: Did it have oceans?

Dent: Oh yes, great, big, wide, rolling oceans.

Marvin: Can't bear oceans.

Dent: Tell me, do you get on well with other robots?

Marvin: Hate them.

Also, Marvin's despair undercuts a traditional role for robots in sf, that of the innocent abroad. In this context, Marvin's world-weary hatred of robots reads as a hatred of the robot genre.

The television programme builds on Marvin's bathetic character. The paranoid android may have a "brain the size of a planet" but he looks like a tin toy circa 1950. The series' other attempts at visualizing bathetic incongruity don't work quite as well. The Vogan ship, all grease and girders, seems intended to undercut the pristine modernity with which spaceships used to be represented. But, post *Star Wars*, the dirtied-down look had quickly become the norm and it was Beeblebrox's modernist spaceship, *Heart of Gold*, that looked dated. The effects also worked against Dent's reaction to the ship ("This is my idea of a space ship, all gleaming metal, flashing lights, everything"). Apparently, American audiences thought the special effects were themselves a bathetic joke. Recalling a publicity tour of America, Simon Jones noted, "I was ready to say, 'isn't it impressive?... Absolute cutting-edge special effects,' and the first thing the disc jockey said to me was, 'Of course, what I liked about it especially was the deliberate tackiness of the effects'."

If the tone of *Hitchhiker's* is bathetic, then its form is a kind of burlesque, an amusing imitation of the conventions of sf. This imitation is flattering rather than disparaging. In this respect, *Hitchhiker's* is similar to Terry Pratchett's "Discworld" novels, which pastiche fantasy conventions while remaining faithful to them. In both cases, the respective diagetic worlds remain intact and retain their credibility irrespective of the absurd goings-on within them. For instance, Marvin is easily identifiable as an example of a generic figure, the perennial malfunctioning robot.

In part, *Hitchhiker's* status as satire rests on a satirical tendency within sf as a genre. Noting "there's a false belief that sf and humour do not mix," Peter Nicholls has argued that satire was the prevailing mode of proto-sf and that much humour in sf takes the form of social satire. Nicholls describes *Hitchhiker's* as the apotheosis of a pes-



simistic worldview in which "the ordinary guy battered by circumstance" tries "to find meaning or justice in a Universe where these commodities may be nonexistent," and places Adams's work in the tradition of Collier, Sheekley, Dick, Sladek and Vonnegut.

There are certainly plot similarities between *Hitchhiker's* and Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*. In Vonnegut's novel millionaire Winston Niles Rumfoord becomes caught in a Chrono-Synclastic Infundibulum, which materializes him at different points and times in the solar system. From this almost omniscient position, he manipulates the lives of individuals apparently at whim, but actually at the behest of Tralfamadorians who have interfered in human history to create and deliver a spare part to their messenger stranded on the moon Titan. Great works of human achievement are really Tralfamadorian messages of encouragement to their stranded comrade. So, Stonehenge, when viewed from above, reads: "replacement part being rushed with all possible speed"; and the Great Wall of China means: "Be patient. We haven't forgotten about you." However, Adams asserted that comparisons with Vonnegut were merely a convenient label and that the two writers' works were "utterly different." This is a reasonable claim. Dent and Prefect are not puppets in the way Vonnegut's protagonists are, and where the universe of *The Sirens of Titan* is cruel, the universe of *Hitchhiker's* is silly.

*Hitchhiker's* has also been linked with another satirical tradition: the 1960s "satire boom," inaugurated when four Oxbridge undergraduates (Alan Bennett and Dudley Moore and Cambridge Footlights Club members Peter Cook and Jonathan Miller) staged *Beyond the Fringe* at the 1960 Edinburgh Festival. At times, Adams mines the same vein of humour as his predecessors. So, *Beyond the Fringe* and *Hitchhiker's* share a similar joke about the futility

of nuclear safety campaigns. The *Beyond the Fringe* sketch ran: "What can we do from a practical point of view in the event of a nuclear attack? The first cardinal rule is to be out of the area where the attack is likely to occur (...) As soon as the dust is settled the best you can do is hold your breath and jump into a brown paper bag (...) You can do anything you like in this brown paper bag." In *Hitchhiker's* a barman finally realizes the world might be coming to an end when Pre-

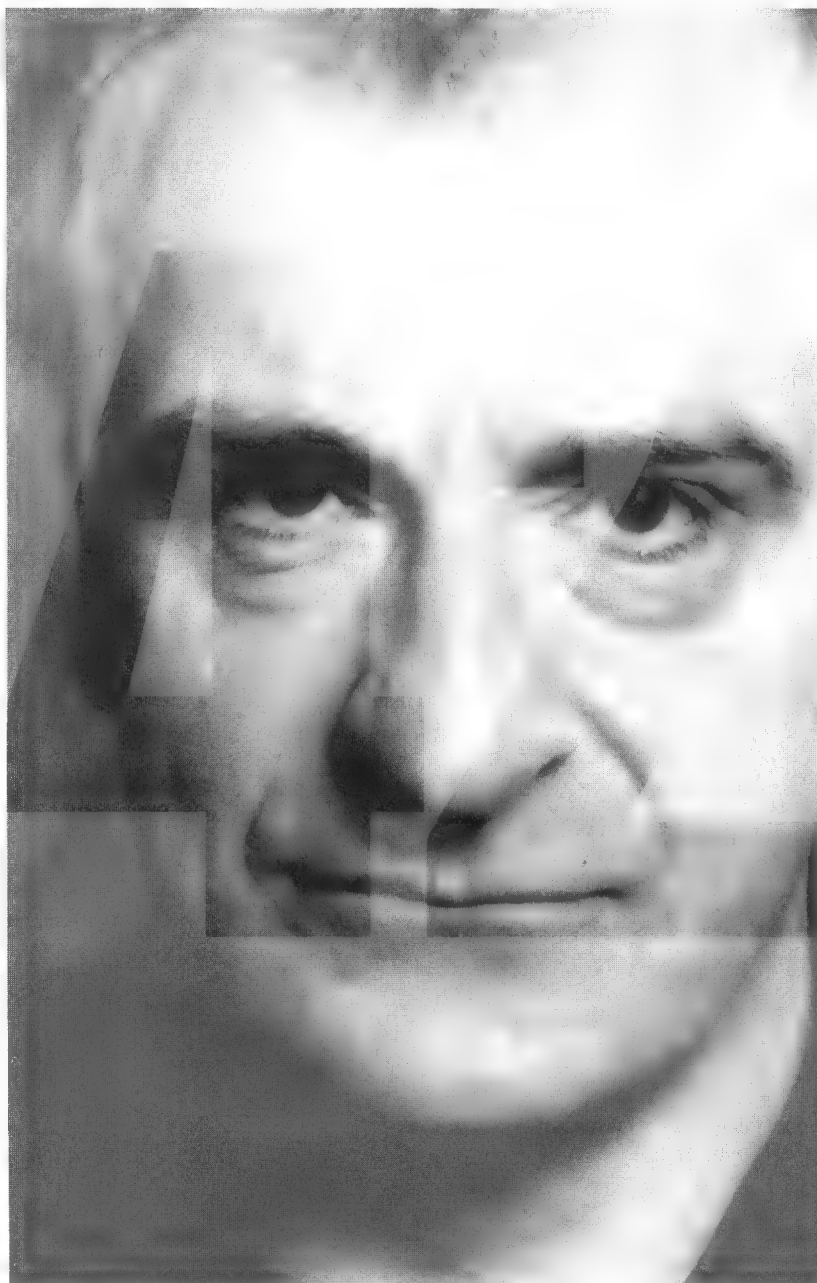
Ford: No, nothing.  
Barman: I always thought we were supposed to lie down or put a paper bag over your head or something.  
Ford: Yes, if you like.  
Barman: Oh, will that help?  
Ford: No. Excuse me, I've got to go.  
Barman: Oh, well. Last orders please.

John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado's analysis of Adams's time as writer and script editor on *Doctor Who* notes that the author crossed the programme's

conventions with "the developing tradition of British intellectual and 'absurd' comedy (*Fringe-TW3-Monty Python-Fawlty Towers*)." This resulted in two amusing spoofish adventures, "The Pirate Planet" and "The City of Death," as well as a couple of direct nods to Footlights and Cambridge – a cameo appearance by Footlights members John Cleese and Eleanor Bron, and a story, "Shada," set at Cambridge.

Although Footlights' content has always had to be modified for wider public consumption, *Hitchhiker's* bears a number of its marks. Others have detected strong links with Footlights' most successful spin-off, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Speaking on the *Omnibus* documentary, Richard Dawkins noted Adams was able to see the world as "one big *Monty Python* sketch." Geoffrey Perkins, producer of the *Hitchhiker's* radio series, said Adams and the Python team shared "completely the same comic sensibility" and, in the 1980s, Adams was

"the natural heir of *Python* for some time." Adams's fleeting connection with *Python* was exploited in American publicity for the *Hitchhiker's* novel. Neil Gaiman's companion book, *Don't Panic: Douglas Adams & The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, notes that a press release for the American Harmony/Crown edition began, "And now for something com-



fect pays for his peanuts with a bunch of five-pound notes:

Barman: Are you serious sir? Do you really think the world's going to end this afternoon?  
Ford: Uh, yes, in just over three minutes and five seconds.  
Barman: Well, is there anything we can do?

pletely different..." and introduced Adams as "a former scriptwriter for *Monty Python*." (According to Gaiman, Adams had made a minor contribution to the record of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* and had two walk-on parts on the *Python* TV series.)

But Adams rarely used the same comic techniques as the *Python* team. He was a master of comic exposition rather than dialogue. There are few scenes that afford the rote learning of scenes once practised by small boys in playgrounds or, today, where two or more middle-aged men are gathered together. One exception to this, is a scene between two philosophers, Majikthise and Vroomfondle. The exchange, here préciséd from the novel, goes like this:

Majikthise: I am Majikthise.

Vroomfondle: And I demand that I am Vroomfondle!

Majikthise: It's all right, you don't need to demand that.

Vroomfondle: All right! I am Vroomfondle, and that is not a demand, that is a solid fact! What we demand is solid facts.

Majikthise: No we don't! That's precisely what we don't demand! [...] We are philosophers.

Vroomfondle: Though we may not be.

Unfortunately, Adams seems to have shared the Pythons' difficulty in writing for women. "I always find women very mysterious," he recalled in *Don't Panic*. "I always get very nervous about writing one as I think I'll do something terribly wrong... I feel very nervous about going into that area." Where Adams was uneasy about women, other groups seem not to have entered his consciousness at all. This tells us something of how elites are perpetuated. It is through feelings about who is Our Kind of Person that cultures come to exclude others. Adams was certainly a member of an institutional elite. His 1976 Footlights production *A Kick in the Stalls* featured Rory McGrath (*They Think It's All Over and Chelmsford 123*) and Jimmy Mulville, now the boss of Hat Trick, the biggest independent production company of TV comedy in the UK (among its programmes is *Whose Line is it Anyway?*). Other Footlights members among Adams's cohort have gone on to secure other positions within broadcasting. For instance, Anthony Root (Footlights, 1974) became script editor of *Doctor Who* after Adams's tenure on the programme.

In 1974, alongside Adams, Footlights members included Clive Anderson (the barrister turned sketch-writer for *Spitting Image* and host of *Whose Line is it Anyway?*), Griff Rhys Jones (*Not the Nine O'Clock News*) and, most signifi-

cantly, John Lloyd (producer of *Hitchhiker's* on radio and Head of Comedy at the BBC). It is hardly surprising academic Stephen Wagg described the "satire boom" as a "minor revolt of the privileged." Although the sons and heirs of the "satire boom" (the actual sons and heirs of doctors, barristers and high-ranking civil servants) may adopt an anti-establishment tone, it is hard to see how Adams and his colleagues were and are not part of the establishment, albeit one expanded from the Church and State to include broadcasting.

What the revolution in comedy achieved was a new tone of irreverence and disrespect for institutionalized authority. At the same time, its members effectively seized the institutional means of the production of humour in the media industries and secured a firm place for Oxbridge undergraduate comedy in British radio and TV schedules, albeit typically outside prime time and on channels with remits to serve minority interests. "These days," Frankie Howerd complained on *That Was The Week That Was*, "you need a degree just to be filthy." Even the "alternative" comedians of the 1980s were alternative only by degree. Series such as *The Young Ones* and *Bottom* may have appropriated the carnivalesque humour of popular culture (violence, vomiting and farting), but the educational background of their exponents was alternative to the extent that they went to universities other than Oxford and Cambridge.

But *Hitchhiker's* did not only emerge from traditions of undergraduate humour. Acceptable occasions for humour are licensed by society and so the acceptance of new and different types of humour can be linked to changes in society. For instance, Humphrey Carpenter has suggested that the 1960s "satire boom" was occasioned by the disillusionment with traditional authority resulting from the Suez Crisis and the end of the British Empire.

In contrast, Wagg points to the defining influence of a postwar consumer culture. He argues that the trend towards "satire" and silliness poked fun at all public, party-political participation in favour of privatized, personal, life-style choices. Such humour evades social responsibility, so "the fruits of the 'satire boom' have helped the satirists themselves and many western consumers shrug off any guilt they may have felt about enjoying themselves simply by asserting the across-the-board absurdity of it all." A defining characteristic of *Hitchhiker's* is its engagement with consumer culture. Adams creates a commodified universe in which planets are made to

order and planetary features, such as fjords, are the result of preferences in taste. The Guide maps out a universe of bestsellers, popular drinks and colour supplements. Earth is located at the "unfashionable end of the Western Spiral Arm of the galaxy" and the state of civilization is judged by the lack of sophistication of its consumer choices. The Guide notes scornfully that the planet's ape descendants "still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea." Other life forms revel in their status as commodities. Beeblebrox's second head and third arm are fashion accessories. The Dish of the Day has been bred to want to be consumed. In contrast, Marvin, true to his function, undercuts the pleasures of consumption. Advertised as "your plastic pal who's fun to be with" and shown playfully cavorting on a beach, the actual article is a lumbering depressive, neither a "pal" nor "fun to be with."

Of course, as a commodity, *Hitchhiker's* was itself a product of consumer culture. Its numerous versions seek to exploit the synergies of the marketplace and prefigured today's cross-media exploitation of cult programming. Indeed, Adams's status as a cult author is partly a function of the consumer culture he lampoons. As Tulloch and Alvarado point out, *Doctor Who* had a space for authorship in order to appeal to a young, educated, middle-class audience. Today's cult TV shows do the same. Fans, in particular, are adept at spotting the marks of authorship in the products of mass production.

*Hitchhiker's* is not a political satire. It is a burlesque, which plays on the incongruities produced by merging the conventions of sf with the life styles of consumer culture. *Hitchhiker's* lampoons this culture, but does not offer a tenable alternative. The programme's only utopian vision is a wistful, pastoral fantasy based on a naive and distinctly bourgeois individualism. So, humans long to return to the trees, Adams, in a cameo, divests himself of clothing and money to walk into the sea, Reginald Perrin-style, and the TV series ends with Prefect and Dent implausibly whiling away their years on a prehistoric Earth (Prefect, travelling the world; Dent, living in a cave).

How the *Hitchhiker's* utopia is to be realized remains unclear. The programme prefers to create a universe of humour rather than a world of meaningful action. Personally, while I find its vision of a galactic consumer culture very funny, its pessimism feels corrosive. The *Hitchhiker's* invitation to accept the futility of quests for meaning is one I decline. After all, there is only one thing you can thank nihilism for, and that's nothing.

Tim Robins

I used to think the prejudices against genre fantasy were unfair. Now I'm not so sure. Of course fantasy is a tradition. Like all traditions, it has its conventions. But the greatest fantasies, from *Gulliver's Travels* to *The Metamorphosis*, from *Titus Groan* to *Little, Big*, are by their nature exceptional works, products of highly eccentric imaginations. They are odd, weird, and perverse. Even *The Lord of the Rings*, by the standards of its time, is odd, weird, and perverse.

The truth about fantasy is this: fantasy (unlike, say, crime fiction) is not a formula, amenable to endless repetition. Fantasy is only interesting when it is strange. This is why it can only be diminished, indeed deadened, when it finds itself imprisoned in the narrow cage of genre, forced to sing the same songs again and again in order to satisfy pre-ordained, market-driven notions of what is acceptable. This is why we should cherish odd, weird and perverse fantasists when they (all too rarely) appear. One such is Jonathan Carroll. Another is Geoff Ryman. A third is Jeremy Dronfield, a young British writer who makes a powerful bid to join their company with his remarkable fourth novel, *The Alchemist's Apprentice* (Headline Review, £14.99).

This is a seriously strange book. Narrated (we are meant to believe) in the author's real-life voice, it tells the story of his friend Roderick Bent ("Drick" to his friends) who has disappeared after a brief but spectacular career as a bestselling novelist. After long years of unpublished torpor, Drick's career had suddenly exploded with the publication of (yes) *The Alchemist's Apprentice*, a novel set in Malta during the Second World War. Published under the pseudonym "Madagascar Rhodes," this warm-hearted romantic saga (clearly modelled on *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*) had taken off, after a slow start, to become "one of the biggest – if not the biggest – publishing bonanzas of the 90s."

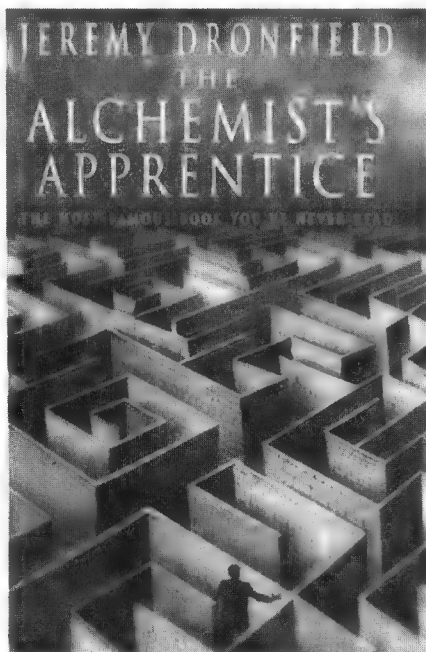
The only thing is, no one remembers it now. Literally no one. In fact, only Jeremy Dronfield (that is, the "Jeremy" in the book), even possesses a copy of this once-famous bestseller. It is as if "Maddy" Rhodes had never existed, as if he had simply been wiped from history. But now Jeremy (or "Jeremy") has discovered a series of documents, or "packets," in which Drick appears to explain the mystery. Thus, this book. Interspersing Drick's account with Jeremy's, *The Alchemist's Apprentice* tells the remarkable true (or "true") story of *The Alchemist's Apprentice*, which turns out to involve far, far more than the mere disappearance of one book. And one author.

Dronfield draws heavily on traditions of contemporary literary fiction, particularly of the self-conscious,

## From Borderlands to Heartlands

Tom Arden

reflexive variety. There are echoes of John Fowles (*The French Lieutenant's Woman*), Iris Murdoch (*The Black Prince*), and Martin Amis (*The Information*). But while *The Alchemist's Apprentice* begins as a postmodernist literary game, it soon develops (not unlike Carroll's *The Wooden Sea*) into a fantasy of the most extravagant sort, depicting a world in which history may be altered through the intervention of certain gifted individuals, of whom (it emerges) Jeremy's friend Drick was one. Essentially this is a work of alternative history, but of a highly original sort (Harry Turtledove it is not); in effect, what Dronfield has produced is a meditation (but a compellingly readable one) on the very notion of history and its alternatives.



REVIEWED

How the plot unfolds I shall not reveal; suffice to say that history as we have it now, according to Dronfield (or, perhaps, "Dronfield"), is already, so to speak, the alternative version. Filled with accounts of what "really happened" in the Second World War, or why Kennedy was assassinated, or how Tony Blair became Prime Minister (there is also a very good Ann Widdecombe joke), *The Alchemist's Apprentice* is a remarkably clever, tricky, satirical, relevant, contemporary novel about conspiracy theories, the processes of history, the art of creative writing, and much else besides. A fantasy of the best sort, it is also very funny and, in the end, deeply moving. Jeremy Dronfield is a considerable talent. This is the real thing.

History and its alternatives also loom large, if inadvertently, in Paul McAuley's new novel *Whole Wide World* (Voyager, £16.99). Publishing schedules being what they are, McAuley must have completed this book about a year ago, but certain elements already have a weird pre-science. Before the novel starts, terrorists (anti-globalists, in this case) have devastated London's financial heart, not only with bombs but with computer viruses, wiping out vast swathes of digitally-encoded wealth. Britain after the InfoWar is a bleak place, more or less a police state, where security guards and surveillance cameras loom from every corner – all of which seems just a little too familiar to be "science fiction" or "fantasy." Rather, it is as if the "near future" McAuley depicts is really only a slightly altered view of our present situation.

Like its predecessor, *The Secret of Life*, McAuley's new book could be

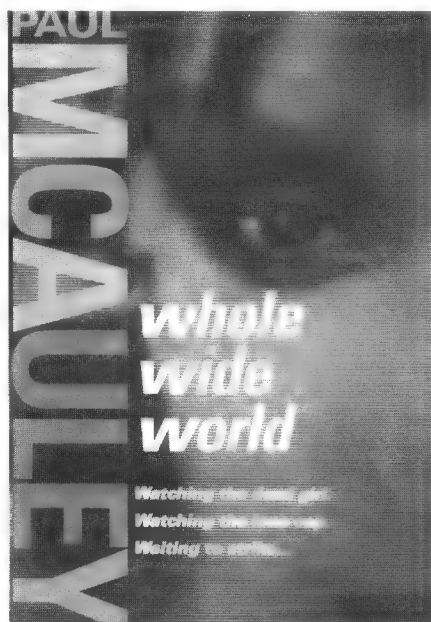
described, accurately enough, as a technothriller. In other respects, it is a very different book. The earlier novel, about a dangerously replicating biohazard from Mars, was set mainly in the USA, featured a female protagonist (a high-powered scientist), and, though told in a curiously blank, third-person, present-tense style which often seemed alienating in its effect, was ultimately upbeat in mood, celebrating the transfiguring power of science. For a British writer, this was a very American book.

Paul McAuley, however, is nothing if not versatile. *Whole Wide World* is all about the internet and information technology; McAuley's grungy, near-future Britain is its principal setting; and its protagonist, male this time, is a burnt-out, beer-guzzling detective who narrates his tale of squalor, crime and conspiracy in a laconic, first-person style which, despite its derivation from the "mean streets" genre, remains decidedly British in tone.

It is also decidedly bleak. The novel begins when the brutal murder of a young woman is relayed live over a "voyeur" website. Who murdered her? And why? Eager to return to active duty after a bombing during the InfoWar which shattered his nerves, McAuley's protagonist John Dixon finds himself becoming obsessed with the case, drawn ever deeper into a web – a world-wide web – of perverse intrigue where nothing is as it seems and contract killers, porn barons and government corruption pave the way to the inevitably violent climax.

If, in the early pages, McAuley's dispiriting (though accurate) cops-and-squalors vision of London brings to mind an episode of *The Bill* with added sf trimmings, this is nonetheless a very good book of its sort, the sort in question being a relentless, plot-driven, roller-coaster ride of hard sf, noir crime and political thriller, intelligently provocative, and stuffed with enough references to punk-era British music to constitute an imaginary soundtrack. Those who still think The Clash had talent will enjoy this book. The few who remember Wreckless Eric will enjoy it even more, realizing that the novel's title is not only a play on "World Wide Web" but a nod to that estimable performer's most famous composition.

Unexpectedly, the novel also features a nostalgia more profound than a mere hankering after old pop songs. This is evident, for example, in the realistic and tender account of the narrator's grandmother ("Every Monday she boiled up all the laundry in an aluminium cauldron, stirring it with a great wooden ladle and running everything through the mangle"). In such passages, as in a series of references to World War Two, McAuley conveys a



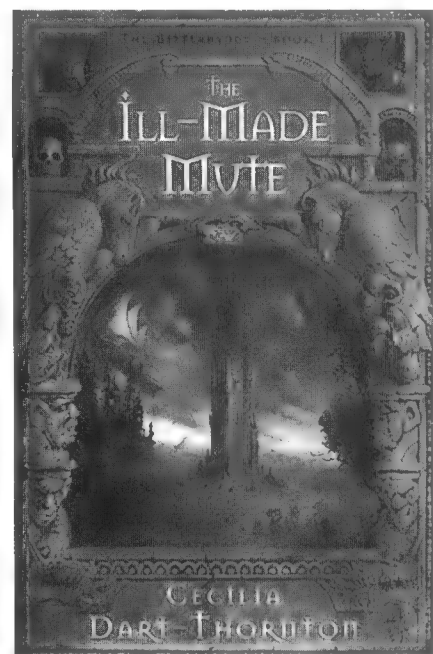
sense of loss and ambivalent despair which underpins and gives depth to his dark vision of a future that is not so much near, as already with us.

With *Whole Wide World*, McAuley's publishers continue the attempted repositioning of his career with began, very obviously, with *The Secret of Life*, moving him out of the sf ghetto into the mainstream "thriller" market. While some in the sf world may bemoan this, the attempt is not an ignoble one. For one thing, McAuley is a talented writer who deserves a bigger audience; for another, *Whole Wide World* is a work of true generic ambiguity, in which advanced technology is no longer a matter of fantastical speculation but of the purest, most sober realism. While generally very different from Jeremy Dronfield's book, it is like it in

its refusal of easy categories. *The Alchemist's Apprentice* blends actual and imagined history to reflect powerfully on our real-life experience; in McAuley, the science-fiction novel and the realistic novel are finally (and productively) merging together. In both writers, the borderland between "literary" and "genre" is unclear.

It is in such borderlands that much of the most interesting contemporary fiction is likely to emerge; ergo, much of the least interesting will be found in the rolling heartlands of genre. The once-rich fields of fantasy are a case in point. Writers such as Carroll, Ryman or Dronfield show what fantasy can do when it is set free. On the other hand, if you tether fantasy, if you turn it into something boringly commonplace and churn it out in endless, turgid blockbusters, wholly devoid of originality, style, intelligence, irony, wit, or literary sophistication (a fair description of most current fantasy), then what you are left with is the dulllest, most dim-witted genre of fiction this side of Harlequin romances.

And the stuff keeps on coming. Here are two new entrants to the fray: Cecilia Dart-Thornton, with *The Ill-Made Mute* (Macmillan, £17.99), and Michael Cobley with *Shadowkings* (Simon & Schuster, £10). Both are the work of first-time novelists. Both are the openings of promised trilogies. Both are said to be the work of major new talents ("Not since Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*... have I been so impressed by a beautifully spun fantasy," says Andre Norton of one of them – you can guess which one). Both feature quotations from imaginary ancient texts. And both begin with those badly-drawn maps of fantasy kingdoms which nowadays, I am certain, provoke no sense of excited antici-





pation in anyone over the age of twelve (I speak, of course, of mental age).

The "ill-made mute" of Dart-Thornton's strangely inept title is a disfigured child with no memory and no powers of speech, who fetches up at a mysterious (but not very vividly described) castle in the first chapter. Swiftly turned into the lowliest of castle drudges, the child gradually takes in the attributes of its bleak but weird world. The rulers of the castle are "Stormriders," who fly about imperiously on winged horses. "Windships" ply the skies. Legends of supernatural beings, inhabiting the world beyond the castle, keep the lower orders in check.

Eager to escape its miserable life, the child soon stows away on a windship and escapes the castle, only to fall into the hands of pirates – at which point it discovers, believe it or not, that it is not a boy, as it has hitherto assumed, but a girl. Alas, nothing interesting is done with this potentially provocative transsexual theme. Instead, the girl, named "Imrhien" by a kindly pirate, sets out on the inevitable fantasy quest, in this case to find the wise woman who will, in due course, restore her lost powers of speech, not to mention her ruined appearance (you know, make her look like a *proper* girl). Naturally there is much intrigue on the way, and it soon becomes clear that there are those who are after Imrhien, and want her dead. In any case, after 400 pages little is resolved, and the sequel looms.

*The Ill-Made Mute* is not without merits. Unlike many an epic fantasist, Dart-Thornton writes with what

Johnny Rotten might have called a "reasonable ee-conomy," and the story moves swiftly and readably enough, though the language is uninspired and her idea of a literary flourish is a sort of pseudo-Celtic fustian. People say things like "Fie, wenches!" or "nuncle" for "uncle." She is also the sort of writer – always American or (in this case) Australian – who imagines that an automatic air of Celtic mystery and romance is conveyed by giving characters names such as Liam, Maeve, Roisin and Diarmid (usually spelt Diarmuid, actually). Having taught a great many ordinary teenagers who really were called things like that (these are entirely commonplace Irish Catholic names), I'm afraid this particular piece of magic didn't (as they say in the creative writing groups) quite work for me.

In *Shadowkings*, the magic is altogether darker. Cobley's novel begins 16 years after the fall of the Khatri-mantine Empire (featured in the helpful map), when barbarian invaders burned the "Fathertree" which fuelled the magic of the empire's powerful wizards. Civilization already lies in fragments, but things are about to get a whole lot worse with the impending revival of the evil deity of the invaders, known as the Lord of Twilight. (Only twilight? Well, I suppose "Lord of Darkness" would have sounded too hackneyed.)

Now the Lord of Twilight, it turns out, is not quite dead but "shattered" into a series of "hosts," his soul distributed among the five souls of those

destined to become the Shadowkings. Cue warlord Byrnak, who discovers that it is his fate to be one of the Shadowkings (this is his big dilemma). Meanwhile Tauric, lost heir of the empire, begins his struggle to regain his throne, while knights, mages, the evil acolytes of the Lord of Twilight, and a vengeful Earthmother (that's her name, Earthmother) also loom large in this vigorous, violent fantasy adventure.

Anything but sentimental, this is the kind of latterday fantasy that stakes its credibility (that is, its presumed distance from everyone else's similar novels) on its unillusioned darkness. Cobley's fantasy world is frequently squalid, politics is a dirty business, war really hurts, and good and evil are by no means clear. All of which might be good, I suppose, but it also strips this book (and others like it) of the children's-story charm which gives this kind of thing its appeal in the first place. *Star Wars* would not be better if it were filled with sex scenes and real violence.

Both these books are adequately literate, and not entirely plotted by numbers. A lot of people (not just Andre Norton) will like them. And (let us concede) they are good as far as they go. The trouble is, they do not go far enough. They are not so much original, compelling acts of imagination as minor variations on a tired formula. They kill time. What they do not do is challenge, provoke, elevate, instruct, or move the emotions deeply, which is what I would like to think fiction is for.

Tom Arden

Even after the career-best brilliance of Ramsey Campbell's *Silent Children*, his new novel *The Pact of the Fathers* (Forge, \$26.95) does not disappoint in any way. It is a powerful, original story, told with charm and wit and vigour. Daniella Logan is a student, a waitress and the daughter of a famous film-maker, Teddy – or Theodore – Logan. Following Teddy's death in a car crash, Daniella witnesses the beginning of some sort of ritual beside his grave, and it's fair to say that from this point on matters take a turn for the worse for the girl. If the bereavement is not enough, it isn't long before she understands that her father's business partner is not all that he seems, and not long before she learns that her father was not as wealthy as was assumed. In fact, the air seems rich with lies.

Worse still, however, is Daniella's tripping over the truth about the pact of which her father had been a part, and discovering what was buried in her father's grave and what the significance of one of the books on his shelf was. From this point on she cannot trust any of the fathers, some of whom

## Celluloid and Slime

David Mathew

she has known, via her own, for many years: not the child-welfare organizer, who kills a boy; not the doctor of the hospital to which she is admitted, only to find that it is not the kind of place she had expected to reside in for any length of time, and certainly not the grimy comic or the newspaper guy.

Fortunately, as she spirals down into a plot that seems ready made to thwart her – with every turn she faces forcing her to call on reserves of great strength – Daniella can call upon a good friend with whom she shares a house, and can find refuge on a Greek

island, courtesy of an actress whose career Teddy Logan established in his pictures. There is also a film journalist (but I had my eye on you, mate, from the off) who is eager to get into Daniella's head, for a piece on her father – not to mention into her trust and into her underwear. Such help aside, though, it is Daniella who faces the burden of making the diabolical pact public, for at first she fails to convince anyone of the truth; and we root for her through every page of the suspenseful plot.

*Pact of the Fathers* would not be a Ramsey Campbell book if it did not exhibit his astonishing way with language. Sentences wear cloaks and conceal, briefly, double meanings and puns; people speak to each other crisply, and with great energy, be it negative or positive; and Campbell lets fly not only one very strange and over-adjectived sentence – "When her little nippy cute snub-nosed bright blue Ford emerged from the car park..." – but thousands of examples of great new ways of looking at familiar scenes. "She dragged her driver's atlas out of the glove compartment

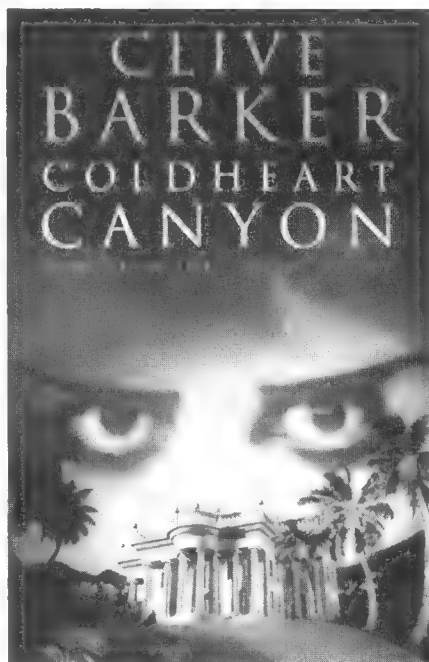
and peered at a flayed Britain..." – where "flayed" works so well to describe the average roadmap, but also – in context – says so much about Daniella's current frame of mind. London traffic consists of "a tarry stream of taxis" and much later, when Daniella is attempting to make enquiries at a travel agent's: "He performed a brief virtuoso improvisation on his computer keyboard and glanced at her as though to declare himself unworthy of applause."

Well, if the travel agent is not so worthy, then the book at least is.

Staying on the subject of films, Clive Barker's *Coldheart Canyon* (HarperCollins, £16.99) is a hefty, highly readable, nosy sniff at the very anus of Hollywood. (And I dare you to put *that* on a book cover.) As with the Campbell, some dirty secrets are rising to the top – to the streets of Tinsel Town – like scum. We begin in the 1920s, with a movie magnate buying his actress/mistress a wall mural that is decorated with all manner of perversity, and we are to infer as we move to the present that the exhibition is available in the canyon of the title. We focus on a slope-sliding actor who is unwilling to face the truth about his waning career, and is in fact keen to go under the knife if it will make him seem younger and more accessible to the movie-going public. But the facelift is not a success. The place that his manager finds for him to recuperate and to heal from the scars is a palace of dreams, secluded and uncharted on any American map. A place where, in the 1920s, some wild and vicious parties took place. The question is, did they ever end?

Clive Barker has given us an interesting allegory, and I only regret that I saw the ending coming early on. I very much wish that the book had gone through another draft, or a more rigorous edit, because it's a hundred pages too long and over-wordy in plenty of places. It is certainly not a patch on his finest novels – *The Damnation Game*, *Weaveworld*, *Sacrament* – but is worth reading for the saddest scene that Barker has ever had in print, to the best of my knowledge: the heart-breaking deterioration in health of a pet dog. In this scene we glimpse the Clive Barker who could shock, who could stun; the Clive Barker who could bring a reader to tears.

M.F. Korn's writing is as American, as they say, as apple pie; and *Confessions of a Ghoul and Other Stories* (Silver Lake Publishing, \$14.95) is no exception. What this book has in common with *Coldheart Canyon* is a glimpse at the feeding frenzy of corporate, capitalist America. There are six short stories and one novella, "Confes-



sions of a Ghoul: Apologia Pro Mea Vita," and the slim volume is a joy to read.

In "Eternal Questions Posed at the International House of Pancakes" we have a spot-on evocation of student life, which takes in all the ponderous banality of late-night conversations when you have nothing but balderdash to spout. Batman, skinheads, the end of the world and slackers are discussed in a story that put your reviewer in mind, however inappropriately, of the Tom Waits album, *Nighthawks at the Diner*, with its "rendezvous of strangers around the coffee urn tonight." In Korn's world the drink of choice is a "pristine brewed, infallible mixture upon which to stoke himself from eleven pm to six am. This left Mark with a schizoaffective mind by at least 3.30." And a good eye for amusing detail is on offer: "The



two guys who topped those previous two were an animated flake named George Rhombus, and a country fat-boy named 'Nimrod' who had read every syllable of Blavatsky and Velikovsky, to give himself breadth regarding lost empires." The long novella is similarly detailed and beautifully structured: a look at how badly some people long for proximity to the supernatural.

"The Great Find of the Non-Traditional Computer Cowboys" sees the guys deciding to find a famous dead person – but "not Amelia Earhart because Steve didn't know how to swim." Their reason for the escapade? Because they have heard that "co-eds remark all the time how grave-robbing has become stimulating." They go on a quest to locate the body of Ambrose Bierce, and the story is very funny... Elsewhere, read "Rags to Riches to Hell" in a Faulkner accent, and "The Unwelcome Guest" examines the very nature of writing and drinking. My personal favourite is the sarcastic "Letters from Skitzo," in which a writer places an advertisement for a pen-friend, or rather for "epistolary discourse, however antediluvian" and receives a reply from a thrash metal band. The writer confesses that they have just "wasted" their bass player, and the correspondence begins...

It hardly seems any time at all since I was reviewing *Crimewave 4: Mood Indigo* in these pages, but here is *Crimewave 5: Dark Before Dawn*, edited by Andy Cox. Available via the TTA Press website at [www.tta-press.freewire.co.uk](http://www.tta-press.freewire.co.uk), this book's outer appearance is immaculate and sleek, and the stories inside, while not as varied as those in *Crimewave 4*, are by and large entertaining and highly readable. In fact, the only real disappointment is "Face Value," a novella by Shelley Costa, an author whose work I have previously enjoyed, which annoys and rankles because of its faux-philosophy and fripperies, and its overall air of satisfied glibness. And sentences such as this: "Nothing I learned fifteen years ago literally at the hands of Bunny Burgoyne prepared me for this sudden certainty that sex, like God and major league baseball, is beyond our understanding." And I really do wish that the maggoting of good books with advertisements could be banned.

To better things. Jason Gould gives us an itch and a frown with "The Fear" in which a lovey-dovey couple, forced apart for a couple of days by the husband's out-of-town convention, talk goo-talk down the phone until said hubby fails to place the receiver down properly. If you eavesdropped on your partner, how many of the nasty surprises you heard would you forgive? This is

the central question of the excellent little story. What this poor woman hears does not even start at a simple affair.

Gould's theme of voyeurism is present elsewhere: in the Sean Doolittle novella, "A Kick in the Lunchbucket," for example, which opens the book and introduces the first in a line of fictional detectives. How much do we know about our neighbours? How much do we *want* to know? The protagonist of this tale, "one of the world's great watchers," is spying on a man who is spying on one of the neighbours. Could it be that a famously missing young woman is being holed up next door by a kidnaper?

They join forces. But if you do not know much about your neighbour, how much less do you think you might know about a complete stranger with a p.i.'s business card? Despite the wealth of typographical errors, this is very good work – and although I never thought I'd use this cliché, Sean Doolittle is a name to watch.

As is Antony Mann, who provided one of the standout stories in *Crime-wave 4* (with two-pages of shopping lists), and is again on fine form. Once more mixing horror and humour, Mann shows off the best conceit of the book: that the police will start to take babies and children to crime scenes.

"Milo is supposed to be my lost sense of wonder, my permanently impaired fascination with the mundane that went out the window as soon as I got my driving license and applied for my first credit card." And for a final standout, try Andrew Humphrey's "Family Game," a story written in a gutsy vernacular which ostensibly deals with marital problems and infidelities. But there is a good deal of sullen power to what is not said in families – a point which takes us full circle back to the Ramsey Campbell novel, and with which I will end my words.

David Mathew

Freda Warrington's *The Obsidian Tower* (Earthlight, £6.99) brings the "Jewelfire" trilogy to its conclusion, collecting the scattered characters together and fulfilling the promises made in the first volume, *The Amber Citadel*. In place of the scattered missions of the second book, *The Sapphire Throne*, Warrington focuses upon Pari-one and those left after the Bhadrado-men invasion. Deposing Helananthe, Vaurgroth continues his conquest of Aventuria whilst attempting to brainwash the population through their religion. However, Helananthe manages to escape and unifies the resistance. Meanwhile, the Aelyr suspect that their allies have begun to break their pact and are forced to side with the humans.

The joy of this series has been the characterization and the way that the author provides a series of twists that further deepen the characters. Having left each protagonist in their own prison, Warrington forces their expansion from stock epic fantasy characters to individuals who are able to drive the story. However, in between this, she does manage to throw various surprises at the reader, such as Vaurgroth's true identity, which adds richness to this novel. Although time is taken to reunite the plot strands, Warrington avoids using the final battle as the vanquishing of the Bhadrado-men, rather attempting to restore the balance between the worlds, thus emphasizing the message that is developed in this final part of the story.

The drum-beating concerning the evils of religion and the joys of Paganism mars this concluding novel. Indeed, an entire order is suddenly created to "educate" Rufryd into hating humans before attacking Aventuria. Suddenly this order disappears from the novel, thus leaving this reader slightly at odds with the disrupted flow of narrative. But despite this, Warrington has created a quick-paced story that unfolds in each book, revealing new twists and duplicities. The landscapes force the characters to unfold in their own way, growing to

## Unfolding Fantasies

Iain Emsley

accept new truths. The illusions that drove the original characters are shattered, recast in post-lapsarian fashion.

Maggie Furey's *Spirit of the Stone* (Orbit, £16.99 hc, £10.99 tpb) continues the epic "Shadowleague" series. Having rescued Zavahl, Veldan and company must ensure that he reaches Ceregor and the Shadowleague so

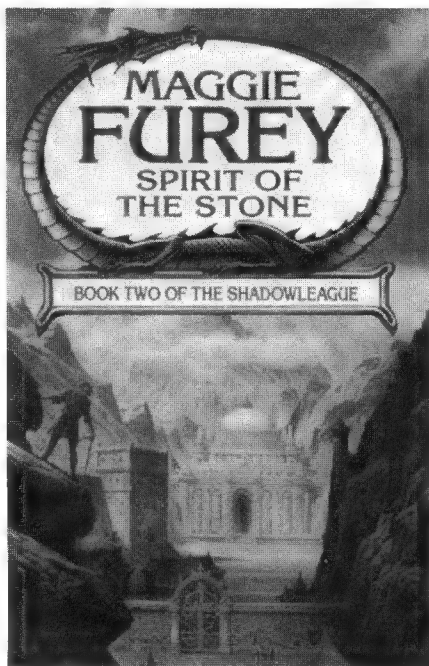
that they can access the memories of the Dragonlord harboured in his mind. Lord Blade gives chase but is forced to pursue them on foot. Meanwhile, the Curtain Walls dividing the worlds continue to fail, opening Myrial to attack. As Tiarond is attacked, the Grey Ghosts find a purpose within the besieged city.

Furey continues to adapt her world that is now in deep crisis, deftly bringing in new characters who add to the richness of the novel. She develops the peripheral characters, adding to the back story, hinting at links with her earlier "Artefacts of Power" series. As the world becomes less stable, she concentrates on the darker elements to each character, each of whom seems to be driven by a need to express their humanity and life. Even Kazairl's banter becomes increasingly dismissive, but Furey gives the reader hope of matters becoming more positive.

*Spirit of the Stone* allows for the back story to be developed, thus enlarging the world and societies of Myrial. The pace constantly changes, pushing itself, reacting to the various situations rather than pursuing its own ends relentlessly. Maggie Furey shows that she can write a good, solid fantasy that draws upon much familiar territory, but her characters have a complex motivation which is what really make the books of the Shadowleague a worthwhile read.

A new juvenile fantasy series that has intrigued those of us who have heard of it is "Unfortunate Events" by Lemony Snicket. The third and latest is *The Wide Window* (Egmont, £5.99), though the whole will run to 13 volumes. The narrative follows the fortunes of the Baudelaire children after the death of their parents. Under the terms of the will they must stay with various relatives – while they are being pursued by Count Olaf, a wicked cousin who wants their fortune. Reminiscent of Edmund Gorey, it is a wonderfully dark but comic series.

Iain Emsley



Gwyneth Jones's books have always been a problem for me. From the perplexities of *Divine Endurance*, *Escape Plans* and *Kairos*, through the more ordered insanities of *White Queen*, *North Wind* and *Phoenix Café* to the gloriously anomalous *Flowerdust* I have read, and marvelled, and shaken my head – these books are awesomely, intimidatingly intelligent, and I feel I am not doing them justice, although I am grateful to feel that they are dragging the best I can offer to the fore.

It's not that her books are impenetrable. I love reading them, and invariably come away feeling uplifted. And it's not that she can't write easy, accessible prose; I have around 25 books by her on my shelf – albeit many are intelligent children's books as by her alter ego, Ann Halam – all of which I have read, and, to some extent, fathomed. But her adult books do demand that you engage your whole self, mind and body, with them. My usual mode of reading a book goes like this: a bit on the train, a bit in the loo, and a bit in bed before I fall asleep, until I get near the end, when, if I'm really enjoying it, I will often stay up late to finish it, dozing off the while. It's not a pretty picture, but it is how I read, and, after all, books are supposed to be entertainment. Unfortunately, I have found treating Gwyneth Jones's books like this means that after about a hundred pages I have not got the slightest idea what is going on (I have the same problem with John Crowley, so she is in good company). So I have to go back and concentrate, and try to read in larger sittings.

So it was with some trepidation that I opened *Bold As Love* (Gollancz, £17.99 hc, £10.99 trade pb), only to discover, after a week of sporadic reading, that, again, I had no idea what was going on. So I set aside some quality time, and sat down to read in large chunks.

It is mostly a comment on our mad-cap times that someone should have to make such space in their days. There was a time when such leisure was mine almost daily. But, given a major personal trauma at the same time and my usual fragmented schedule, it is an achievement almost beyond measure that Gwyneth managed not only to hold my attention with her narrative, but to move me deeply.

*Bold as Love* is a near-future fantasy of what it might be like if a government became so out of touch with the people that it recruited rock musicians to try to re-establish communications, and how this might backfire to deliver real political power into the hands of the unelected rock stars of the day – imagine Noel Gallagher or Jarvis Cocker

## Triangulating on the Puzzle that is People

Paul Brazier

co-opted for their charisma to figure-head a government, only to prove (as some of us already know Cocker is) to be so much more articulate, politically aware, and capable as a manager than his recruiters that he ends up taking over. This isn't what happens in this book, but it is a reasonable parallel.

Briefly, the background of the story is a near future British Isles that is in the process of devolving itself into four separate nations. The British (soon-to-be English) government sets up a committee to discuss New Faces for the Upper Chamber, and recruits various members of what they think is the "pop music" world to discuss how counter-cultural ideas might be explored by the

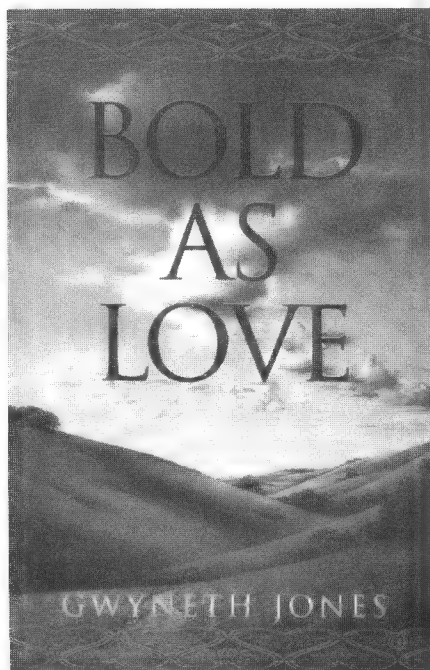
government – and it is a mark of how out of touch they are that they recruit a small section of what we would know today as the Indie scene. Our heroes, Fiorinda, Ax and Sage, drift into this meeting almost by accident, but get caught up in the maelstrom of events.

The novel focuses on the development of an uneasy but very close male friendship between Ax and Sage, their two very different relationships with Fiorinda, and her growth from an intelligent but ignorant child to an extremely mature and world-weary 18-year-old. It also takes into account the various abuses they suffer as children, with particular, but far from prurient, attention paid to Fiorinda's suffering at the hands of another triangle – her remote rock-star paedophile father, her bitter, estranged and ex-rock journalist mother, and her mother's younger, vindictive and manipulative sister. How these aspects are manifested are the very stuff of the book, and it would be beyond my brief to try to give an account of them here. It is possible to give a flavour of Gwyneth's complex character building, however. Fiorinda is close friends with a band called Aoxomoxoa and the Heads – indeed, Aoxomoxoa himself is Sage, one of the central trio of heroes of the book. This band live in Sage's van, and manifest a thoroughly clichéd rock'n'roll lifestyle of lots of drugs and booze and mayhem and fast food. Gwyneth sketches them thus –

They never mentioned her father to Fio. They must know the whole story, but they drew a veil; they were a tactful bunch of drunken laddish idiots. (p21)

While the statement is an almost perfect oxymoron, it does feel peculiarly apt, perhaps because it offers a hint as to the reason for the loutish behaviour – that the lads might be understanding and thus tactful because they also have such histories that they are using this life style to retreat from.

As the novel proceeds more and more of these interlocking triangles of relationships appear, like one of those cellular spy rings where no one knows, and therefore cannot betray, more than three others. It is tempting to go in search of other iterations of this structuring device – is the setting of the *three* major points of action in Reading, London, and North-East England significant? Why does the action take *three* years? Surely it means something that Northern Ireland has already been merged with Eire, so that the UK will become *three* separate countries on Devolution day. But, as I said above, Gwyneth's writing demands that you engage your whole self, mind and body. Do this, and it quickly becomes plain that, while it might be intellectually satis-





fyng to search for meaning in triangular forms in her work, there is no emotional aspect, and thus such a search is irrelevant and chimerical.

Nevertheless, I was reminded ineffably of the recurrence of prime numbers, including many examples of "three," in Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* – but where Delany appears to use the numbers as a kind of intellectual game to keep the deconstructionists occupied, Gwyneth appears to be offering a powerful insight into the ways human relationships are built; where a one-to-one relationship is fairly straightforward, with perfectly delineable two-way stresses and strains, the addition of a single extra person recomplcates this to six-way, comparable to the three-body problem in astrophysics. It takes powerful two-way bonds to survive the introduction of a third body, and this book is full of such relationships either flying apart under the strain or building and becoming ever stronger and closer with the exercise.

Delany was again evoked for me in that the Heads wear digital skull masks. These are similar to the projected-light body masks the gangs in *Dhalgren* wear to conceal the inner person while projecting their chosen attitude to the outside world. Also, and here comes the *third* one, no one manages to describe parties quite like Delany, with the complex ebb and flow of emotion and management of characters who are becoming more or less in control according to the amount of substances they are consuming. No one, that is, until now: Gwyneth creates tour-de-forces of such group activities, from the "New Faces for the Upper Chamber" committee meeting to rock concerts to the massacre in Hyde Park, and while it takes concentration to keep it all straight, it is all there to be read, and always rewards the reader with extra insight that would be missed if skimmed over.

It is a pleasure to report, also, that I think I have identified the source of my problem with Gwyneth's writing, and, as implied above, it is my problem and not hers. It is to do with attention. Gwyneth introduces her characters in exactly the way we get to know real people – they emerge gradually from the background noise of the general ruckus that is life. She shows us the puzzle that is people, but there is always a cross-referring complexity to the information she presents that means it can't simply be pieced together like a jigsaw or a crossword, nor is "the meaning of an episode... inside, like a kernel," as Joseph Conrad puts it, "but rather it is outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze."

(*Heart of Darkness*, p30)

In the following passage, Sage and Ax are trying to help Fio overcome a fugue state. Her teeth are chattering –

The skull turned to Fiorinda. "There. The night is ours. What d'you want to do? Wanna drive out to the motorway bridge and chuck cans at the slaves of the evil empire? Or shall we go into town, go people-watching among the common folk?"

"You c-can't take the van into town, Sage. You know what happened last time."

"How about visiting the ancient Britons, see if they died out yet—?"

"What Ancient Britons?" asked Ax, understanding that *last time* must refer to some incident two summers ago. Fiorinda had escaped back into the days of innocence. (p177)

This is the most overt example I could find of Gwyneth's subtle storytelling style. She never uses any intrusive info-dumps to tell us about her characters; rather, we learn about them in the same way we learn about

The launch for *Bold as Love* was held at the Sussex Arts Club in Brighton on 22 August, where Gwyneth gave a spirited reading from the manuscript of the novel and gave the lie to her description of the rock'n'roll lifestyle by only drinking the one bottle of beer.



the people we are close to in our own lives. Ax's osmotic soaking up of the reference to "*last time*" without any querying of the context is absolutely typical of the way we blot up tiny details about people and suddenly find after we've known them for a while that we know all about them without ever being told. And because I don't usually pay enough attention when I read – most books *don't* repay it, and it becomes a habit – I fall over when reading a book that is this well written. But, boy oh boy, am I grateful. The gradual revelation of the triumvirate's characters makes the reading of the book a reward in itself, and the final scene of them cosying up together in a disabled toilet in the Reading Leisure Centre after a huge celebratory gig redolent of the *Bob Dylan 30 Years* concert is a satisfying close to the novel, while also making it plain that the next novel, *Castles Made of Sand*, is likely to pick up where this one ends.

Given the current world situation, it would be dereliction of duty by me not to mention Gwyneth's treatment of Islam in the book. She confronts the problem of Islamic separatism head on, in the form of an incipient civil war between central government in London and the largely Islamic communities in Yorkshire, but through a combination of religious understanding, superb plotting and sheer good-heartedness she comes up with a realistic solution that is both pragmatic and satisfying to all parties. At one point, Ax says –

"...to me *Islam* means faith. It means accepting the will of God, and accepting that the task of the human community is to become the presence of God's mercy and compassion on Earth. You'll never convince me it has anything to do with headscarves. Or how much you have to nick before you get your hand chopped off." (p159)

I've been an atheist as long as I can remember, but this is an attitude that I have no problem buying into. In this wonderful book, Gwyneth Jones tackles two of the great problems of our time, child abuse and Islamic Fundamentalism, and offers novel solutions that might not suit everyone, but that are evidence of an awesome and compassionate intellect at work. I can't wait for the next volume. Re-reading isolated passages to quote for this review has decided me. I'm going to go back and read this one again. And again, probably.

Paul Brazier

*Postscript:* The artist for the cover art of the book is acknowledged, but nowhere is it noted that the superb frontispiece, which was reproduced on p24 of *IZ* 169 to illustrate "The Salt Box," is by Bryan Talbot.

# BOOKS RECEIVED



## SEPTEMBER 2001

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anthony, Piers. **Swell Foop**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86906-1, 300pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the 25th in the "Xanth" series of light, essentially juvenile fantasies, in which, according to the blurb, "a spirited sextet of brave adventurers battles deadly demons in a cosmic game for the future of Xanth.") *October 2001*.

Ashley, Mike, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Fantasy**. Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-374-7, xii+500pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; not to be confused with the same editor's various 'Mammoth Books of Comic Fantasy, this is a "straight" anthology of some of the classics of magical or other-worldly fantasy; it includes reprint stories by James P. Blaylock, Theodore R. Cogswell, Charles de Lint, Lord Dunsany, Harlan Ellison, Lisa Goldstein, Robert E. Howard, Tanith Lee, Ursula Le Guin, Fritz Leiber, George MacDonald, Patricia A. McKillip, A. Merritt, Michael Moorcock, Darrell Schweitzer, Lucius Shepard, Clark Ashton Smith, Michael Swanwick, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Vance, Jack Womack and Roger Zelazny, plus one original story by Louise Cooper.) *27th September 2001*.

Ashley, Mike. **Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood**. Constable, ISBN 1-84119-417-4, xviii+386pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Biography of a leading British horror/fantasy writer, first edition; proof copy received; it contains photographs and a full index; 23 years in the making, this study of Blackwood [1869-1951], author of *John Silence: Physician Extraordinary* [1908], *The Centaur* [1911], *Tales of the Uncanny and Supernatural* [1949] and numerous other books, is scrupulously researched and probably constitutes Mike Ashley's magnum opus to date; recommended.) *11th November 2001*.

Aylett, Steve. **Toxicology**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07109-5, 131pp, hardcover, cover by Graham Roundthwaite, £16.99. (Quasi-sf/fantasy "slipstream" collection, first edition in this form; it's an expansion of the slim collection of the same title published by Four Walls Eight Windows in the USA, 1999; six stories have been added for this UK edition; there are 26 pieces in all, many of them very short, several of them reprinted from original anthologies of recent years such as *Sex, Drugs, Rock 'n' Roll*, *Disco 2000*, *BritPulp*, *TechnoPagan* and *The New English Library Book of Internet Stories*; an Amazon.com reviewer is quoted on the back cover, describing the book as "a potent, poisonous, post-cyberpunk cocktail of ultraviolence and outrage with a splash of Burroughs, a dash of Ballard, and a twist of Dick.") *27th September 2000*.

Brandon, Paul. **Swim the Moon**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87794-3, 380pp, hardcover, cover by Rafal Olbinski, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "a mystical tale of love, music and magic set off the stormy coast of Scotland," this is a debut novel by a British-born Australian author.) *12th September 2001*.

Brom. **Offerings: The Art of Brom**. Foreword by Arnie Fenner. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-918-1, 128pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Brom, £20. (Horror/fantasy art portfolio, first edition; a second selection of work by this American painter, whose first book, *Darkwerks* [1997], we described as "highly imaginative, often horrifying, frequently erotic and sometimes witty; recommended.") *21st October 2001*.

Brooks, Terry. **Antrax: The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara, Book Two**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7432-0953-2, 375pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; more airship adventures in this new sub-set of Brooks's highly successful "Shannara" series.) *17th September 2001*.

Bucher-Jones, Simon, and Kelly Hale. **Grimm Reality, or The Marvellous Adventures of Doctor Know-All**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53841-4, 276pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series

spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor.) *1st October 2001*.

Bunch, Chris, and Allan Cole. **Sten 8: Empire's End**. "Over one million Sten books sold worldwide." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-083-0, 522pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; eighth and last in this paperback-original space-opera series, now appearing in the UK for the first time.) *4th October 2001*.

Cadigan, Pat. **Dervish is Digital**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-39107-0, 229pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; a follow-up to the author's *Tea from an Empty Cup* [1999], concerning the further adventures of policewoman Dore Konstantin in an artificial reality-dominated future; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 169.) *12th October 2001*.

Calder, Richard. **Impakto**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-0895-0, 442pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; Calder's eighth novel; the opening part first appeared in substantially different form as a separate novella, also called "Impakto," in *Interzone* 150 [December 1999].) *3rd September 2001*.

Card, Orson Scott. **Shadow of the Hegemon**. "Book Two of the Shadow Saga." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-066-0, 444pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; sequel to *Ender's Shadow* [1999], in the new set of sequels to Card's greatest success, *Ender's Game* [1985].) *4th October 2001*.

Chadbourn, Mark. **Always Forever: Book Three of The Age of Misrule**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06682-2, viii+452pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Sullivan, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; third of a "dark fantasy" series which seems to be tilted towards the horror end of the scale.) *30th September 2001*.

Chadbourn, Mark. **Darkest Hour: Book Two of The Age of Misrule**. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-766-7, 471pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000.) *30th September 2001*.

Charnas, Suzy McKee. **The Furies**. "Book Three of The Holdfast Chronicles." Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86606-2, 383pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; part of the four-book feminist sf sequence, the other volumes of which are *Walk to the End of the World* [1974], *Motherlines* [1978] and *The Conqueror's Child* [1999].) *27th September 2001*.

Clark, Simon. **The Night of the Triffids**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-76601-8, ix+469pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf/horror novel, first

published in the UK, 2001; a sequel-by-another-hand to John Wyndham's best-selling disaster story *The Day of the Triffids* [1951]; it's copyright "Simon Clark and The John Wyndham Estate Trust"; reviewed by Phil Stephensen-Payne in *Interzone* 170.) 18th October 2001.

De Lint, Charles. **The Onion Girl.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87397-2, 508pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; set in the imaginary city of Newford – "where magic lights dark streets, where myths walk in modern shapes" – it's yet another tome in Canadian author de Lint's characteristic urban fantasy vein; it incorporates the short story "In the House of My Enemy," from the collection *Dreams Underfoot* [1993].) October 2001.

Dorsey, Candace Jane. **A Paradigm of Earth.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87796-X, 364pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Canadian writer Dorsey's first new novel since *Black Wine* [1997], it's commended by editor David G. Hartwell as "a novel of love and learning and emotional growth that is reminiscent of the classic sf stories of Theodore Sturgeon.") October 2001.

Eddison, E. R. **Mistress of Mistresses: A Vision of Zimiamvia.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 21." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07284-9, 401pp, B-format paperback, cover by Frederic Leighton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1935; Eric Rucker Eddison [1882-1945] is regarded as one of the founding fathers of otherworldly fantasy fiction; this is probably the first-ever UK paperback edition of the opening volume in his "Zimiamvia" trilogy.) 13th September 2001.

Edwards, Graham. **Stone & Sun.** "Book Three of the Stone Trilogy." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651072-8, 464pp, A-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; third in the trilogy which began with *Stone & Sky* [1999] and *Stone & Sea* [2000].) 1st October 2001.

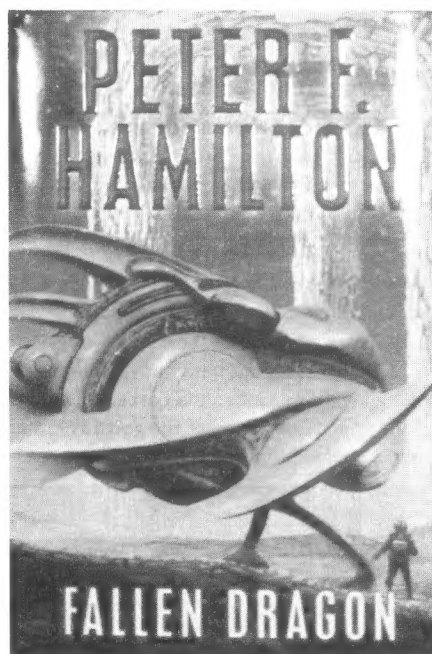
Farrington, Geoffrey. **The Revenants.** Introduction by Kim Newman. Dedalus, ISBN 1-903517-04-4, 245pp, B-format paperback, cover by Willi Gray, £7.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1983; this edition has been revised; it's set in the 19th century and features vampires; Kim Newman calls it "a major achievement in its field.") 4th October 2001.

Feintuch, David. **Children of Hope.** "The Seventh Voyage in the Seafort Saga." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-070-9, 650pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Youll, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; latest in the popular military space-opera series which has often been compared to C. S. Forester's "Hornblower" naval saga.) 4th October 2001.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **A Kiss of Shadows.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81383-8, 521pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; the publishers describe it as "a dazzling tour de force where folklore, fantasy and erotically charged adventure collide.") 4th October 2001.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Narcissus in Chains.** "An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel." Berkley, ISBN 0-425-18168-5, 424pp, hardcover, cover by Craig White, \$22.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; the tenth "Anita Blake" title; this dark fantasy/crime crossover sequence began as an Ace Books paperback-original series, but has now graduated to the dignity of hard covers.) 9th October 2001.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Confederation Handbook.** "A vital guide to the 'Night's Dawn Trilogy.'" Pan, ISBN 0-330-39614-5, vi+231pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £5.99. (Companion to the author's huge space-opera trilogy, first published in the UK, 2000; it contains entries for the people, places, things and pseudo-scientific concepts in Hamilton's opus; it's a testament to the popularity of the author's novels that such a "handbook" can be published.) 12th October 2001.



Hamilton, Peter F. **Fallen Dragon.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90065-0, 647pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £17.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a new interplanetary adventure, it's described as "a stand-alone, action-packed novel of quite staggering imagination from the best-selling British author" – and indeed it looks to be the kind of romp which will keep the many fans of the massive "Night's Dawn" trilogy happy.) 12th October 2001.

Herbert, James. **Once...** "Not all faerytales are for children..." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-76140-5, 469pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "an erotic tale of love, magic and horror.") 5th October 2001.

Herniman, Marcus. **The Treason of Dortrean.** "Book Two of the Arrandin Trilogy." Earthlight, 0-7434-1513-2, 481pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the second novel by a new British writer – follow-up, after rather a long gap, to *The Siege of Arrandin* [July 1999].) 15th October 2001.

Hoyt, Sarah A. **Ill Met by Moonlight.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00860-7, 278pp, hardcover, cover by Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut novel by an American writer who has published short stories variously; here she has the temerity to tackle the Bard: "When his wife and newborn daughter disappear, young Will Shakespeare is drawn into a realm beyond imagination...") October 2001.

Jacoby, Kate. **Rebel's Cage.** "Fourth Book of Elita." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06886-8, 392pp, hardcover, cover by Jon Sullivan, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; a concluding fifth volume in the series is promised; "Kate Jacoby" is a pseudonym of Australian author Tracey Oliphant.) 27th September 2001.

Jones, Stephen, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Vampire Stories by Women.** Introduction by Ingrid Pitt. Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-297-X, xiii+624pp, B-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains reprint stories by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Poppy Z. Brite, Pat Cadigan, Nancy A. Collins, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Elizabeth Hand, Tanya Huff, Ellen Kushner, Tanith Lee, Yvonne Navarro, E. Nesbit, Tina Rath, Anne Rice, Lisa Tuttle, Freda Warrington, Connie Willis, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and others, together with original stories by Storm Constantine, Louise Cooper, Gwyneth Jones, Nancy Kilpatrick, Elizabeth Massie, Melanie Tem, Mary A. Turzillo and a few others; a strong female line-up – edited by a man.) 27th September 2001.

Kidd, Chico. **Second Sight and Other Stories.** Kidd [113 Clyfford Rd., Ruislip Gardens, Middlesex HA4 6PX], no ISBN, 70pp, saddle-stitched A5 booklet, no price shown. (Fantasy collection, first edition; it contains four ghostly adventures – featuring a Portuguese hero, Captain Luis José Da Silva – by this well-established British small-press writer; also known as A. F. Kidd [born 1953], whose other works include the professionally-published novel *The Printer's Devil*



[Baen Books, 1995].) *No publication date shown; received in September 2001.*

King, Stephen, and Peter Straub. **Black House.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-710042-6, 625pp, hardcover, £17.99.

(Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2001; it's set in small-town Wisconsin and involves a serial killer; King and Straub's "long-awaited" new collaboration, following *The Talisman*, this is the sort of thing which inevitably gets hyped as "a masterwork from two of the greatest storytellers of our time.") 15th September 2001.

Lane, Andy. **Randall & Hopkirk (Deceased): The Files.** Introduction by Charlie Higson. Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2356-9, 192pp, trade paperback, £14.99. (Illustrated guide to the fantasy-comedy-crime TV series produced by Charlie Higson for Working Title Television; first edition; the series is of course based on an older one, which ran on British TV in 1969-1970 [produced by Monty Berman, starring Kenneth Cope and Mike Pratt, and known in the USA as *My Partner the Ghost*] – in the nostalgia-driven world of TV fiction, apparently ruled by 30-somethings who were imprinted for life at the age of five or six, bad old things rarely seem to stay safely dead.) 12th October 2001.

Le Guin, Ursula K. **The Telling.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00863-1, 246pp, trade paperback, cover by Victor Stabin, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a new tale in the "acclaimed Hainish cycle"; reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 162.) October 2001.

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: Avengers.** "E-Branch Volume 3." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-79248-5, 562pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Stanczykowski, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the follow-up to *Necroscope: Invaders* [1999] and *Necroscope: Defilers* [2000] in this ever-extending pulp-style adventure-horror series.) 20th September 2001.

McCarthy, Wil. **The Collapsium.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-326-2, 325pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; the publishers describe it as "combining rigorous hard science with the lyrical beauty of Michael Moorcock's *Dancers at the End of Time* novels.") 13th September 2001.

McKenna, Juliet E. **The Warrior's Bond: The Fourth Tale of Einarinn.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-065-2, 520pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 17th August 2000.

Miller, John de Burgh. **Dying in the Sun.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53840-6, 281pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Second Doctor, Ben and Polly, this one is set in 1940s Los Angeles and appears to

be... yep, it is – a "Doctor Who" Hollywood novel.) 1st October 2001.

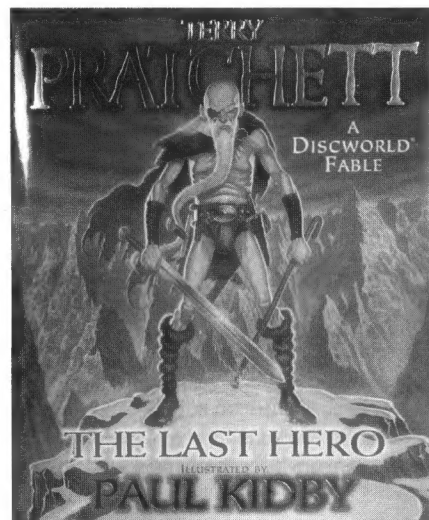
Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Ghost of the White Nights.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30095-8, 398pp, hardcover, cover by Nicholas Jainschigg, \$24.95. (Alternate-world sf novel, first edition; it's a delayed follow-up to the author's earlier novels, *Of Tangible Ghosts* [1994] and *The Ghost of the Revelator* [1998].) 8th October 2001.

Nicholls, Stan. **Warriors of the Tempest: Orcs, First Blood, Book 3.** Gollancz, 1-85798-562-1, 280pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; follow-up to *Bodyguard of Lightning* and *Legion of Thunder* [both 1999].) 13th September 2001.

Odell, Colin, and Michelle Le Blanc. **The Pocket Essential Tim Burton.** "Pocket Essentials Film." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-62-5, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Unillustrated guide to the movies, mainly sf and fantasy, of eccentric US director Timothy William Burton [born 1958]; first edition; it's another useful little volume in this ever-expanding series on the popular arts – they're still good value for money.) September 2001.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents.** Doubleday, ISBN 0-385-60123-9, 271pp, hardcover, cover by David Wyatt, £12.99. (Humorous juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; about the adventures of Maurice, "a streetwise tomcat," this is the first Discworld novel aimed specifically at younger readers.) 5th November 2001.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Last Hero: A Discworld Fable.** Illustrated by Paul Kidby. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06885-X, 160pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Kidby, £17.99. (Humorous fantasy novella, first edition; it features Cohen the Barbarian and his "one final quest" to meet the gods; as Pratchett himself explains it in the accompanying



publicity letter, "*The Last Hero* is a 40,000-word, true Discworld novel that fits in with the other 26 books in the sequence. It's just that it has an extra dimension: some parts of it are written in paint!") 18th October 2001.

Pratchett, Terry. **The Truth.** "The 25th Discworld Novel." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14768-0, 444pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; about the misadventures of William de Worde, the editor of the Discworld's first newspaper, [who] "just wants to get at the truth"; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 162.) 8th November 2001.

Robson, Justina. **Mappa Mundi.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-75438-7, 465pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a second novel by this promising new British writer who hails from Leeds, it concerns medical nanotechnology and brain manipulation.) 12th October 2001.

Singleton, Sarah. **The Crow Maiden.** Cosmos Books [PO Box 45, Gillette, NJ 07933-0045, USA], ISBN 1-58715-324-6, 236pp, trade paperback, cover by Arthur Hughes, \$15. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a British writer [born 1966] who has previously published only short stories, including three in *Interzone*, it looks to be a very "English" work, set in present-day Wiltshire but involving magic from the past; it's commended by Ian Watson as "a brilliant novel, powerful, sensuous, earthy, and often quite luminously magical"; Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher which has now released a large number of titles – although we have seen few of them; the Cosmos side of the operation, edited by Sean Wallace, seems to specialize in British authors, and has announced new novels by Barrington J. Bayley, Keith Brooke and Brian Stableford, among others; some of these may or may not be out by now – since Cosmos/Wildside are very hit-and-miss in sending review copies, and don't announce reliable publication dates, we have no way of telling.) *No publication date shown; received in September 2001.*

Skene, Anthony. **Monsieur Zenith the Albino.** Introduction by Jack Adrian. Foreword by Michael Moorcock. Savoy [446 Wilmslow Rd., Withington, Manchester M20 3BW], ISBN 0-86130-109-9, xxxvi+250pp, hardcover, cover by John Coulthart, £20. (Fantastic crime thriller, first published in the UK as *Monsieur Zenith*, 1936; "Anthony Skene" – not to be confused with TV writer Anthony Skene [born 1924], who wrote a number of episodes of *The Prisoner* in the 1960s – was a pseudonym of George Norman Philips [1884-1972]; his creation Zenith the Albino was the villain of many "Sexton Blake" novellas written by Skene for the boys' papers of the Amalgamated Press in the



1920s; this, which does not feature Blake, but is otherwise similar to the boys'-paper yarns, is one of four full-length novels by Skene originally published in the 1930s, and it is said to be exceedingly rare, with "only three extant copies" known before now; it's illustrated throughout by John Coulthart, supplemented by period illustrations by Eric Parker and other boys'-paper artists; Michael Moorcock informs us that Zenith was one of the inspirations for his sword-and-sorcery hero Elric of Melniboné; a curious slice of 1930s pop-cult hokum, from the publishers of *Lord Horror* and other more "envelope-pushing" works.) 24th October 2001.

Smith, Gus. **Feather & Bone.** Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-03-5, ix+307pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £8.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut novel by a British writer who has been a contributor to the small press for many years; this is the fourth book from the new "print-on-demand" publishing house established by Ben Jeapes; for ordering information, see his website: [www.bigengine.co.uk](http://www.bigengine.co.uk).) September 2001.

Spedding, Sally. **Wringland.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90566-0, 547pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut book by a British writer who has "won awards for her poems and short stories" [not to be confused with the unfortunate Alison Spedding, jailed in Bolivia]; thanks in no small part to the success of Peter F. Hamilton [see above], and thanks to their willingness to take on new British writers [see, for example, Justina Robson, above], the venerable house of Macmillan – original publishers of *The Water-Babies*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Jungle Books* and Algernon Blackwood's *The Centaur* – seems to be thrusting to the fore once more as a publisher of new sf, fantasy and horror.) 21st September 2001.

Tenn, William. **Here Comes Civilization: The Complete Science Fiction of William Tenn, Volume II.** Edited by James A. Mann and Mary C. Tabasko. Introduction by Robert Silverberg. Afterword by George Zebrowski. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 1-886778-28-0, v+545pp, hardcover, cover by Rolf Mohr, \$29. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains 25 stories and an essay, plus the novel *Of Men & Monsters* [1968], by this somewhat underrated author of satirical sf; "William Tenn" is a pseudonym of American academic Philip Klass [born in London, 1920]; completing the two-volume Tenn set, this is another very worthy NESFA collection.) 15th October 2001.

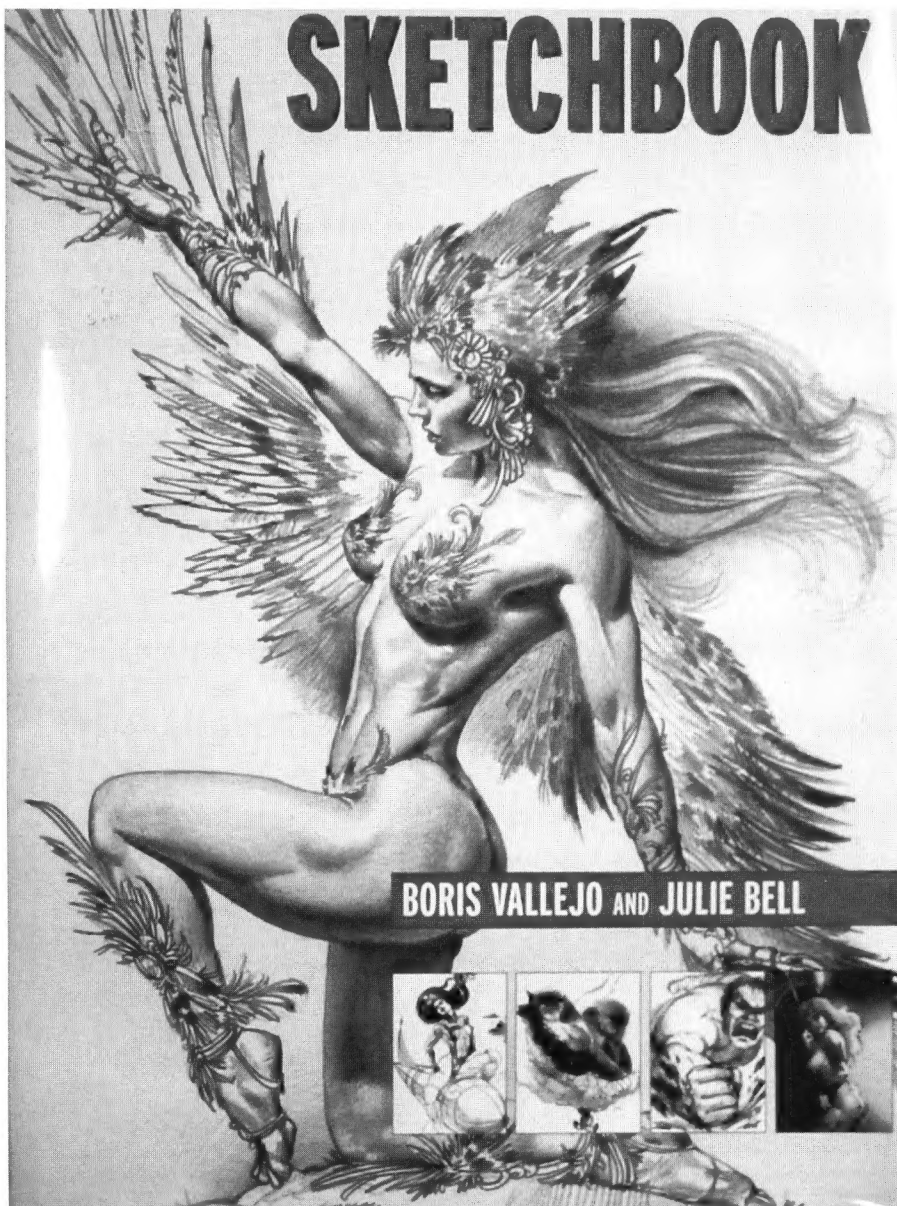
Vallejo, Boris, and Julie Bell. **The Sketchbook.** Text by Nigel Suckling. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-929-7, 160pp, large-format

hardcover, cover by Vallejo, £20. (Fantasy art portfolio, first edition; although a fair proportion of it is in colour, much of it consists of black-and-white pencil work; there's the usual focus on spectacularly muscular men and buxom women that one expects from this husband-and-wife team of popular artists.) 25th October 2001.

Watts, Peter. **Maelstrom.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87806-0, 380pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Canadian writer Watts's second novel, it's a sequel to his first, *Starfish* [1999], and similarly deals with matters oceanic.) October 2001.

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **A Feast in Exile: A Novel of Saint-Germain.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87843-5, 496pp, hardcover, cover by Barry Appell, \$27.95. (Historical horror novel, first edition; latest in the non-chronological "Comte de Saint-Germain" vampire series which has been running for over 20 years now; this one is set in India, circa 1400.) 28th September 2001.

Yeovil, Jack. **Drachenfels.** "A Warhammer Novel. A Genevieve Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-152-4, 271pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1989; "Jack Yeovil" is a pseudonym of Kim Newman, and this was in fact his first published novel [although his first under his own name, *The Night Mayor*, was written earlier]; despite being an essentially minor entertainment, it's a witty and fluent work; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 35; yours truly, David Pringle, was the editor of this book when he worked for Games Workshop Books in 1988-1991 – and thus can testify that the text has been re-set in its entirety [single quote marks, where originally we had double, no acute accent on "Geneviève," and so on], so it may be that it has also been revised somewhat.) October 2001.



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